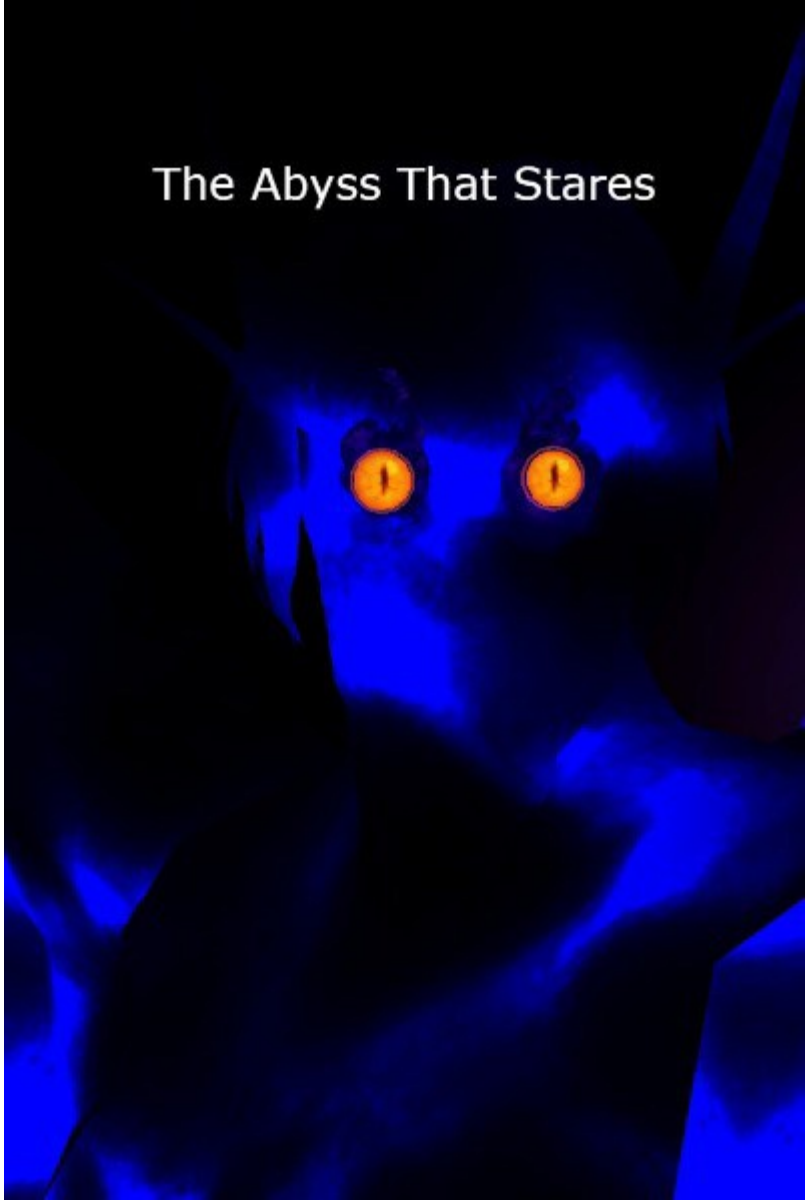
The Abyss That Stares

THE ABYSS
THAT
STARES

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Chapter 1: The Testing Grounds

Hungry.

Always hungry.

Wrap tentacles around prey.

Interrupted.

Annoyance.

Wave tentacles, grow big. Intimidate interferer.

Undeterred. Pokes.

PAIN.

Move away, back to home. Safe.

Interferer sticks poking instrument iN NOT SAF-

PAIN.

Move further.

Interferer removes poking instrument.

Home smaller.

Home always smaller when poking instrument leaves.

Vibrations in air.

Interferer is communicating.

Develop audio perceptor.

“-cucses. Sohudl we rcemomned X1 for highre tseitng?”

Confused.

Do not understand.

“Preahsp. Wreti in your rpeotr that X1 has seuceced in mutllipe traisl agiats the rat-bsaed mtunat prtoytpes. Fylnig agrgesros rcemomneded for next tset.”

“Yes sir.”

“Feed-”

FEED!

“-X1 duolbe the usual biomass bferoe rsemunig tseitng.”

Happy.

Move to feed.

Drop of biomass comes.

Wiggle.

Eat. Eat eat eat eat eat.

Tentacles replenished.

Stasis. Must conserve biomass.

…

…

Loud.

Annoyed.

“X1, move to tse-testing grounds.”

Reluctant.

Loud again.

Move. Home opens.

Move.

Move to edge of other home.

Put tentacle against edge of other home…

Still not free. See interferers looking at tentacle.

Vibrations in air. Refining audio perceptor.

Wave tentacle.

Pain.

Move back to edge of other home.

Wave more tentacles.

Pain GRAB!

Screech.

Crush. Struggling stop. Vibrations stop.

Hungry.

Always hungry.

Drag prey to mouth. EAT BEFOR-

PAIN.

Drop.

Move. To corner of home.

No pain. Happy. Home smaller.

Eat prey in mouth before pain. Happy.

New structure. Wing. Beak. Feathers.

“Smae biomass as last test. Ltes’ see if X1 dubolse in size aigna.”

Happy.

Move to feed.

Eat. Eat eat eat eat eat.

Tentacle replenished.

Unusual. Full. Not hungry.

Happy.

Wiggle.

Stasis.

…

…

Loud.

Eager.

More prey. Maybe eat.

Move. Home opens, move more.

Vibrations in air.

BIG!

BIG BIG!

Wave tentacles, grow big. STILL NOT AS BIG.

Big prey moves. FAST!

Push tentacle, move away. Big prey swipes-

PAIN! PAIN PAIN!

Angry.

Develop teeth on tentacle. Wrap.

No effect… ***PAIN!*** Tentacles gone. Body 10% gone.

Develop more tentacles.

Prey bites.

PAINNNN!

Prey tosses aside. Roll to stop.

Develop wings. Fly.

Too heavy. Bigger wings.

FLY FLY FLY FLY land.

On prey.

Safe.

Wiggle.

Harden body. Harden tentacle.

PIERCE HEAD!

Prey still.

EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT

PAIN.

New structure. Sharp teeth. Fur. Thicker skin. Fat. Bone. Simple brain. Brain?

PAIN. PAIN.

Move. Corner. No more pain, happy.

Tentacles regrown. More biomass to grow more tentacles. 30% increase. Wrap main body in tentacles. Leave audio perceptor uncovered.

“Hloy siht! Did you see taht dcotro!? It grew wings! WINGS!”

Happy. Took 40% of mass to grow wings. Noticed.

“I swa-saw Dveno. Stay porfesisonal. Teh’yer still wtacihng. Still, we sohudl note that. X1 seems to aadtp wahtveer it cnosmues into its main body, rteiannig its structure.”

While communicating, develop the brain. Takes 70% of current biomass. Must be good structure.

Processing speed is increased. Strange. Have urge to consume. And… procreate? Find another of same kind. Produce another. Very strange.

Tired. So tired.

Interferers communicating the entire time. Can’t pay attention. Too tired. But more biomass comes.

Eat. Eat eat.

Strange. Ate 200% increase in biomass from last feed, but still hungry. Must be brain.

No more biomass.

Stasis.

…

…

Loud.

Eager.

200% increase in main body size. 40% increase in tentacles. Wings and brain structure still functional.

Move to edge of home before vibrations come.

Home opens.

“X1, move to te- oh.”

Already moving, eager.

***Hungry*.**

Brain increases biomass consumption. But processing speed is increased.

Worth.

Different prey. BIGGER prey. MUCH BIGGER.

Vibration in air. It stamps the ground.

***Hungry*.**

But patient. Always patient.

Move tentacles, circle around. Prey wtahces-watches me.

Wave tentacles. Develop eyes on tentacles.

Prey shakes.

Approach.

MISTAKE.

FAST.

MOVE TO SID-

PAINNNN!

Strange structure on head, not sharp, club. 20% of tentacles gone, 5% of main body gone.

Creature is dazed. Head structure not harder than wall.

Fly. Fly.

Harden body. Harden tentacles. Dive.

PIERC-

Bounce.

Land on prey.

Odd.

Cannot pierce.

Skin is hard.

Harden more. Sharpen.

PIERCE!

Bounce.

1% of tentacles gone.

Strange.

Annoyed. Frustrated. Wave tentacles in air.

Remember earlier prey.

Wrap tentacles around current prey.

Develop muscle. Develop endurance muscle.

Constrict.

Crack.

SATISFACTION!

Strengthen endurance muscle.

CONSTRICT!

CRACK!

Grunt from prey. Freed itself from wall.

Smug. Am on back. Does not mat-

PAIIIINNNNNNN!

50% of main body is gone. Main body is crushed, flat, still on back somehow. 80% of tentacles are gone. Core is still functional. Brain is still functional.

Prey rolled, crushing main body under it. Angry.

Move tentacles, remove endurance muscle. Sharpen.

Move tentacles in cracks. Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig.

Vibrations in air, louder noise from prey. Distressed?

SATISFACTION!

Prey rolls. Learned, move to other side before crushed. Test with tentacles.

Underneath is not as hard.

Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig.

Shudder.

Prey rolls to side, but is still.

EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT MUST RESTORE BIOMASS EAT EAT EAT EAT

PAIN.

Can feel this pain coursing through the main body now, traveling through the tentacles it hits.

New structure: Rigid armor, toughened skin, stomach, intestines.

Move. Move because more pain is coming if don't.

Brain is strange. Helping to learn. Grow.

Quickly move to corner, wait for them to make home smaller.

"…"

"…"

"Oh my god."

"…"

“Dcotro-dcotor. Did it just... “

“Yes.... Yes… did. Un-mtuatde, infnatlie, yes, but… did.”

“The barss… going… lkie this. I think… both… they set up this mtahc. It… to… X1. And it just..”

“This is a… for… but fruhtre testing…”

Tired.

Very tired.

Stasis.

…

Chapter 2: Puzzles and Elemental Resistance Testing

…

Loud.

Move to edge of home.

Eager.

More prey?

Home opens.

Move before vibrations come.

“X1, this is a dfifeernt test. In front of you is a stnoe blal. Open it, and get the biomass inside.”

Confusion.

Biomass?

But no vibrations in air from prey.

Wave tentacles. Develop eyes on tentacles. Look at interferers.

Watching. More of them.

Scan with eyes around bigger home.

See it.

Strange, looks same as main body, but… not. Not same… look. Not same… color? Grey. Not black. Smaller. And no tentacles.

Smug. Inferior design.

Wiggle.

No wiggle back.

Prey?

Reach out tentacle. Push.

No reaction.

Prey hides?

Wrap tentacles.

No reaction.

Smug. Weak prey.

Develop endurance muscle. Refine endurance muscle.

Squeeze.

No reaction.

Annoyed.

Refine endurance muscle.

Squeeeeeeeze.

No reaction!?

Frustrated. Prey hides.

COWARDICE!

Drop prey. Wave tentacles in air.

FRUSTRATED.

Look at interferers. Looking at main body and strange prey. Interferers notice tentacles, shake.

Inspect new prey.

Hard. Very hard. Harder than last prey.

But no danger.

IDEA!

Remember club structure on earlier prey's head.

Harden tentacles. Remove endurance muscle. Develop twitch muscle. Refine twitch muscle. Develop rigid armor.

ATTACK!

Not wrap. Not pierce.

Club.

Crack!

Satisfaction.

Club.

Shatter!

SATISFACTION!

Wiggle.

Biomass inside.

Eat. Eat eat.

Strange prey. No attack, no tentacles lost, no damage to main body. Hard, but… not dangerous.

Interferers enter bigger home. Big interferers, armor, poking instruments.

But not scared.

Interferers… prey?

Move tentacles to closest.

Club.

Bounce.

Armor is harder th-

PAIN. PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN MUST MOVE PAIN!!!

Move back to corner of room. 20% of main body gone. Repair.

Interferers not prey. Too strong.

Home smaller.

“Fcukre took a swnig at me doc. I amlsot shot the dman thing.”

Deflate. Sorry.

“Hunt, it’s braley the size of a hosue cat.”

“Fcuk off Brnsaon. You didn’t see what that thing did to a bbay rihon. No fcuking way I’m lteting any of its tentacles near me. I say we schok the dman-damn thing until it’s rat-sized again.”

Shake.

Fear.

Schok means poking instrument.

“I’m srory abuot that Mr. Stndaseh. X1 has never dsiplyaed agrgessvie bhevaior towards its hnalders before. We’ll have mseaures in place in the eevnt it does so again.”

“Thanks doc.”

“Still, rdecuiotn in size may be apoprpriate for the tiem being. No biomass until further ntoice.”

“Yes sir.”

Sad. FRUSTRATED.

No biomass!?

20% of main body gone.

Stasis. Must conserve.

…

…

Loud.

Strange. Pain in main body, underneath tentacles.

“X1, move to testing grounds.”

Reluctant.

“X1, move to testing grounds.”

Reluctant.

PAAAAIIIN!

PAIN IN MAIN BODY! UNDERNEATH TENTACLES, INSIDE OF BODY!

No poking instrument, but same pain. But worse. Underneath, next to Core.

“X1, move to testing grounds.”

Move. Don’t want pain.

“Cmomnecing elmenatl rsestiance training.”

Strange.

Home is being covered in fluid… but not biomass? Different fluid.

Fluid covers main body.

Unpleasant.

Submerged in new fluid.

…

“Sxi mnitues submerged in wtare. As epxetced, X1 has no need for oyxgen. Darining testing grounds.”

Fluid goes away, this… wtare. But clings to tentacles and main body.

Unpleasant.

Vibrate. Wtare gone. Pleasant.

Wiggle.

“Testing for frie rsestia-resistance.”

Vibrations in air. Wave eye tentacles, look.

Strange. Grey objects enter from floor. Big. Prey?

Submerged again. But not in fluid. In… something else.

Too bright for eyes. Pain, but different pain. Remove eye structure.

Unpleasant. No pain, but unpleasant.

Develop armor.

Relief. But unpleasant again soon.

More armor.

Relief. No more unpleasant.

Satisfaction.

“X1 does not show sgins of ditsrses uopn haet exposure. Hwoveer, it did develop armor to shield itself. Fruthre testing rquierd. Next test is exposure to clod.”

Submersion stops. Reluctant to develop eyes. But do it.

No more bright.

Grey objects are gone.

Happy.

But unpleasant again.

Strange. Movement is slowed.

Tired.

… more tired…

...stasis…

…

“X1 displays sgin-signs of ltheragy when exposed to the clod.”

Tired… but out of stasis....

Less tired.

No tired.

Happy.

Feed?

Biomass?

“Now testing against aicd exposure.”

Another grey object. But different, comes out of top of home.

Fluid drips out of object.

BIOMASS!?

EAT!

Reach tentacle to flui-

PAAAAAIIIINNNNN!!!!

PAAIIINNN!

PAIN WON'T STOP. STOP IT PAIN.

FLUID CONSUMES TENTACLE. REMOVE TENTACLE.

No more pain.

Tentacle gone. Wave eye tentacle, look.

Fluid consumes tentacle.

Strange.

“X1 exbhits etxrmee avdrese reaction to aicd-”

HATE AICD! HATE IT! RESEMBLES BIOMASS! BUT IS NOT! COWARDICE!

“-and dcesveily scarficed its tentacle to prveent further damage. X1’s sruviavl isntnict is stronger than ogrinially thought.”

Home opens. Interferer enters bigger home.

NO!

Move to home before interferer attacks with poking instrument.

Learned. No attack interferer. Not prey.

“This the bguger that had you so sarced Hunt? It’s kinda ctue. In a hroriyfing, edlritch abmontaion kinda way.”

“Fcuk you Carl, that thing is *not* ctue. I’m tleling you, the thing is a msonetr and we shloud kill it.”

“They’re *all* msonetrs, Hunt. That’s kinda the piont. Waeopns testing and all that.”

“Wahtveer. Doc, is that all the testing for tdoay?”

“Yes, that will be all for us Mr. Stndaseh. But lba three appears to have succeeded with their prjoect, so they may have a need for you.”

“Tahnks doc.”

Angry. Don’t like Mr. Stndaseh. Eager to kill main body.

“Dven-Devon, please feed-”

FEED! ***HUNGRY!***

“-X1 the usual biomass size.”

Happy.

Wiggle.

Move to feed. Biomass comes.

But curious. Interferers have lots of vibrations. Want to try.

Develop lungs. Develop respiratory tract.

“Tahnks Doc!”

Vibrations quiet. But must eat!

Eat eat eat eat!

“Hmm? Devon, did you say something?”

“No sir. Why?”

“Oh… just thought I heard… nveer mind.”

Still **hungry.**

Always **hungry.**

Brain consumes too much biomass. But processing speed. Frustrate.

Stasis.

...

Chapter 3: Combat Tactics

…

Loud.

Annoyed.

***Hungry*.**

“X1, move to testing grounds.”

Move. Home opens, move. Wave eye tentacle, look at interferers.

Strange. More interferers now. Not wearing white armor. Black armor.

And previous Interferers scared.

Not… scared. Different. Lesser.

Cowardice?

“Sir, we haven’t tested X1 against multiple cmobatnats before. This may joeprodize the pmrosing results we’ve clolected s-”

“Doctor… it’s out of my hnads. I’m sorry. Espceially after the utter failure of your y-series prjoect and and z-series prj-project. Cloonel Bnenet wants to push the testing forward. To see if it’s worth continuing to alolcate resources to i- is that thing *looking* at us?”

“Yes sir. X1 searches for ingterigy weaknesses in the galss nearly every test.”

New interferer shakes.

Smug.

Wiggle.

“…”

“Sir?”

“It’s not lsitening to us, is it?”

“Hhgily unlikely sir. Previous phsycial ex...”

Annoyed.

No prey. No biomass. No new structures.

Why here?

Hungry.

Move back to ho-

Home closes!?

FRUSTRATED!

Wiggle.

Loud.

Vibrations in air.

PREY!

Look for prey.

…

Three prey?

Big. Same as earlier prey, but bigger. And more.

Recognize structure. Fur. Sharper teeth.

Prey stares. Develop more eyes, grow big. Intimidate.

Deterred. Does not approach.

Circling around. Patient. Different from previous prey. Does not charge.

Circle to closest prey. Watch others.

Loud.

Different loud, coming from all prey.

Fly. Fl-

FAST!

FASTER THAN PREVIOUS PREY!

FLY ***PAINNN*** *STAB!*

Prey drops main body and moves before tentacle reaches.

Cowardice.

5% of main body gone. Repa-

OTHER PREY ATTACKS! STAB!

Prey moves again, before tentacles reach.

Annoyed.

Tentacles too slow.

Develop twitch muscle. Refine twitch muscle. Harden tentacles. Sharpen tentacles. Elongate tentacle.

Farthest prey attacks… patient…

STAB!

Prey moves, but tentacle is longer now! Pierced! Front structure of movement damaged, weakness!

ATTACK WITH MORE TENTACLES!

STAB!

PAIINN!

OTHER PREY ATTACKED WHILE LOOKING AT WEAK PR-

PAAAIIINNN!

Third prey attacks.

BAD! DON’T LIKE! STAB!

Distressed sounds. Both prey move out of reach.

40% of main body destroyed. 20% of tentacles damaged. Brain slightly damaged. Core undamaged.

Relief. Core is most important.

Wave eye tentacles. Injured all three prey. Circling, loud noise from all three again. Not distressed sound… intimidate noise?

Inferior. Does not work.

But not good.

Will be eaten.

IDEA!

REMEMBER HARD BUT WEAK PREY!

Develop rigid armor. Refine rigid armor. Cover main body. Move tentacles inside armor.

Hide.

Frustrated. Is cowardice. But will be eaten if don't.

Develop eyes on armor. Watch prey.

Circling. Patient. All three prey weakened, but not enough.

Biggest prey moves closer. Puts front head structure against armor, structure twitches. Strange.

Other preys approach. Pushes movement structure against armor.

Smug. Armor on all sides. No more pain.

PAIN!

Sharper teeth almost pierce armor.

Refine rigid armor.

Satisfaction. Teeth do not pierce armor.

Will not be eaten, but… frustrated. Also can not eat prey.

Hungry.

Must replenish biomass.

IDEA!

Remove small pieces of armor. Only enough for tentacles.

Refine twitch muscle. Develop endurance muscle. Refine endurance muscle. Develop sharp teeth on tentacles. Sharpen tentacles. Patient… wait for prey to approach again…

Preys approach…

PIERCE!

Only hit one prey, moves before can pierce head. But!

Wrap…

Constrict.

Distressed sounds, tentacle teeth now piercing through fur. Prey's movement structures attack tentacles, severing 10%. Develop more tentacles, wrap more.

CONSTRICT!

Crackkkk!

Loud crack. Prey stills. Drag to armor. Remove armor.

Eat. Eat eat eat.

PAIN!

BUT MUST RESTORE BIOMASS!

EAT EAT EAT EAT STAB!

Constrict.

Crack.

Second prey stills, third prey attacks.

Tentacles replenished. Enlarge. Lengthen tentacles.

PIERCE! FROM SIDES AND FRONT!

Prey moves, only 40% of tentacles pierce. But teeth keep tentacles inside.

Drag prey to main body. Prey struggles.

Smug.

Does not matter.

Pierce head.

Eat eat eat eat eat eat ea-

PAINNN!

Move. Move to home before more pain.

But ate lots of prey before pain.

New structure: Foreleg. Hindleg. Thick fur. Claws. Complex olfactory system. Complex auditory nervous system. Partial predator quadrupedal skeletal system. Compacted red-tissue muscle system.

100% increase in main body size and 40% increase in tentacles, after damage.

Auditory nervous system is superior to earlier audio perceptors. Red-tissue muscle system is superior to earlier twitch muscles.

Happy.

Wiggle.

Interferers communicating. .

“-haps cnogrtaulations are in order, Doctor Rester. I’ll be happy to report to the clo-Colonel that the X-series project is a rseonduing success. It’s good to see that lab three isn’t the only cmopotent team

we have."

"... Yes, sir. Tahn-Thank you."

...

"Doctor… X1 has always been burtlaly effective in its mtehods, but... This was something else."

"... and be happy that it was, Dve-Devon. We came this close to losing X1."

"Doctor, I don't know if you just saw the same thing I did. It tore through lab two's mutated hnuting hnouds like they were ntohing!"

Hnuting hnouds! HATE HNUTING HNOUDS! STRONG PREY *AND* RELIES ON OTHERS!? COWARDICE! UNFAIR!

"And if the colonel hadn't ordered to put X1 against an unmutated, infantile rihnoceros before that? Or a python before that!? All things X1 was not, at the time, prepared to test against!?"

"Whoa doc, I'm sensing some hsotility there. You and the Colonel know each other? I mean, prseonally, I'd try to have it killed too. No offesne"

"... No, it's nothing. I aploigze for my outburst Devon, Mr. Stndaseh."

Angry. Mr. Stndaseh again!? HATE MR. STNDASEH! ALWAYS WANTS TO DESTROY MAIN BODY!

WIIIIIGGGLLLE!

"Devon, please feed-"

FEED! Happy.

Wiggle.

"-X1 double, no, triple the usual biomass size. We're going to have to move X1 to the next stage of testing."

"But doctor, X1 isn-"

"Devon. Triple the usual."

"... Yes doctor.

Move.

Biomass comes.

“Thanks Doc!”

Eat. Eat eat eat eat eat eat.

“… did you say something Mr. Stndas-Standesh?”

“Nope, why?”

“… you’re sure?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.”

“… Alright.”

Still **hungry.**

New structures require more biomass. But worth.

And brain. Brain very worth. Would not have had armor and tentacle

idea without brain.

Stasis.

...

Chapter 4: Physical Examination

…

Annoyed.

“Who’s the cutest wdidle murder ball of daeth around? You are! Yes you are!”

When came out of stasis, was no longer in home. Now in tinier version of home, in new place. Not bigger home, not usual home.

Shake.

Recognize.

Interferers cut off parts of body here.

Interferers move around main body, looking at it. Develop more eyes to watch.

Strange.

Interferers walk on hindlegs, but not forelegs. Different from prey,

and from main body. Did not notice before brain.

Superior design? Maybe give main body hindleg for structure?

And then strange interferer started communicating with main body.

“Hey doc, I think the bugger heard me! It wants to hug!”

Annoyed. Attempts to *constrict* interferer stopped by same walls as home.

Know interferer is not prey. But still want to kill. Strange.

“Carl, please stop terorrizing X1 and resume your tests.”

“Fine.”

Strange interferer leaves, moves to use front movement structures in different place.

Satisfaction.

…

The Creator, Doc, approaches.

“Alright X1, we’re going to start easy. Stay still.”

Comply.

Doctor holds cutting instrument.

Home opens.

Free?

But no. Will be cut and poked if try.

Push out tentacle. Doc severs PAIN tentacle, and home closes.

Watch as Creator brings tentacle to strange device, and studies it.

Then Doc brings another device to its communication structure, and communicates with it.

“Facsinating. X1’s muscle density has increased by nearly 40%. And the cells have begun to dteriorate nearly… 13% slower when separated from its central body. These changes seem unproportional with changes to the size of X1’s main body. During X1’s last physical examination, X1 weighed 6.1 kilograms, and it’s central body had a radius of 9.3 centimeters. X1 now weighs 23.2 kilograms, with a radius of 14.56 centimeters. X1’s previous mean tentacle length was approximately 25.2 centimeters. X1’s current mean tentacle length is 43.8 centimeters. Size of central body and tentacles fluctuates depending on what structures X1 has maintained. The previous measurements were collected when X1 has no other structures maintained.”

Pleasant. Doc noticed superior designs.

A new interferer enters! Don’t recognize! Rare!

“Greetings, Doctor.”

“Ah, hello… Roes? I’ve been told that you were to be transfrered to my team from lab three. If you don’t mind me asking, why were you, well, demtoed in such a way?”

“Not a fucking clue. Ah, apologies for the language.”

“... Doc, I think I know why.”

“Such comments are rude, Mr. Standesh. Well, anyways, weclome to the team. Go ahead and get to work. I assume you know how to perform Rift particle collision tests on a specimen?”

“I do, yes sir.”

“Excellent, you’re already at a higher baseline than Mr. Standesh.”

“... Doc, such comments are rude.”

Smug. Finally. Mr. Standesh is attacked.

…

Bored.

There is pain, and more pain, and pain after.

But bored.

Stasis

…

PAIN!

INTERFERERS ARE CUTTING MAIN BODY!

WILL FIND BRAIN!

INTERFERERS REMOVED PARTIAL BRAIN DEVELOPED EARLIER IN LIFE CYCLE.

Fast. Must remove brain fast, before interferers remove simple brain and make main body unable to develop.

CUTTING INSTRUMENT GETS CLOSE.

ALMOST FOUND!

Relief.

Brain gone.

“Hmm… Cral, wuold yuo mnid shoiwng me teh X-rya reuslts agian?”

“Srue thnig Dveon, have ‘em rgiht… here.”

“... odd. The cahrt shwos taht there shuold be a mass rgiht aobut here, next to the Core, but… nhtoing.”

“Myabe the bguger was shfiting its Core aruond? Haerd form some bolke in lab three when spceimens do that it can rgiht mess with its raidopacity.”

“Prehaps. I was wroried it had strated growing a brain agian.”

“Nah, Doc remvoed that fucntion. Mnoster shuold be toatlly brainless, for now and alawys.”

…

Hate Mr. Stnadeseh.

Cut tool gone.

Communicating interferers.

Wait.

No more cut.

Wait.

Heal cut.

Wait.

Grow brain.

Relief. Processing speed increased again.

“Doctor, I have the Rift particle collision results.”

“Ah, excellent work, thank you Roe-Rose.”

“You’re goddamn welcome. Apologies for my language.”

“...perhaps lab two would be a better fit for you?”

“Please don’t.”

Stasis.

...

Chapter 5: The Observer

...

LOUD!

LOUD CAUSES PAIN!

WHY SO LOUD!?

Realization.

REMOVE AUDITORY NERVOUS SYSTEM!

Relief.

No more loud.

Develop audio perceptors.

“-ove to testing grounds.”

Move.

Hungry.

So *hungry*.

Wave eye tentacles, push against wall of bigger home.

Still not free.

Strange. Interferers display same cowardice behaviors as before. But no interferers with black armor.

“Doctor, I’m still not completely sure X1 is ready for-”

“And your cnocern has been noted, Rose. Unfuortnately, we have to accelerate the time table.”

“I share her concern, Doctor. We should have at least condcuted at least one more physical exaimnation before mo-”

“And you have a valid point, Devon. I understand that. I don’t want to push forward with the testing at this point in time either. But with this one test, we can prove beyond doubt the validity of our work. We’ll buy more freedom to work with X1.”

“... yes, Doctor.”

“Everyone, take your mental blockers. Remember, don’t look directly at it. It’s time. Release the Osberver.”

Confused. Why do interferers display cowardice?

Vibrations in air.

… lots of vibrations.

Must prepare.

Develop foreleg. Develop hindleg.

…

Strange. Forelegs and hindlegs do not support main body. Causes pain.

Keep sinking back to ground.

More vibrations.

Develop compacted red tissue muscle. Develop partial skeletal system.

Better. Legs support. No more sinking, no more pain.

Test moveme-

FAST!

SATISFACTION! MOVEMENT IS SUPERIOR!

Develop armor around main body. Refine armor. Refine red tissue muscle. Refine partial skeletal system. Leave holes in armor for tentacles and legs.

Satisfied. Prepared.

Hungry.

Wave eye tentacles. Look at source of vibrations.

…

Kin?

Sense it. Similar structure. But bigger. Much bigger.

Same shape as main body, before armor. Tentacles wave in air. But main body… stays off ground. Fly? But no wings?

Wiggle.

Kin wiggles back.

Kin's main body is different.

One large eye. Longer, thicker tentacles.

Smug. Vindicated.

Tentacles still superior design than kin's. Kin's tentacles not sharp. No teeth!

"~~Obse/r~~vation~~!~~ ~~y/o/u~~ ~~have~~ ~~no~~ ~~a/c/i/d~~ ~~gl/ands.~~"

CONFUSION! KIN IS COMMUNICATING! BUT NO VIBRATIONS!? HOW?

“Doctor! The Osberv-Observer is communicating with X1!”

“Calm down Rose. This was an expceted scenario. We’ll progress with the test for now.”

“~~Obser/v/atio/n:/ yo/ur i/ntell/igence is mini/mal. Conc/lusion/: path/etic.~~”

Still.

Unsure of meaning. But know kin insulted the superior design of main body.

Unpleasant.

“~~Observat/on: you/ h/ave/ a compatib/le core with this one's. Prop/osition: give /, and you'll /l/ive. /~~”.

And now kin wants Core?

Angry. At kin.

No.

Not kin.

PREY.

HUNGRY.

“*~~Unfortunate. Now must expend resources to take your Core. Inefficient.~~*
~~/~~”

Prey waves tentacles. Intimidation tactic.

Useless.

ATTACK!

Main body moves forwards, much faster than before. Legs superior movement design.

Prey waves tentacles, attacking main body. Have armor. Does not pierce.

Unpleasant sensation in brain. But no pain.

PIERCE!

Prey moves out of range of tentacles, flies higher.

Develop wings. Fly. Fly fly PIEEERCE!

Prey moves tentacles, intercepting main body's tentacles. Still, achieved reduction in prey's tentacles.

Strange. Prey's tentacles wrap around main body's tentacles, and drip flui-

PAIN!

PAAAIIINNN!

AICD!? PREY USES AICD? COWARDICE! INFERIOR DESIGN, UNFAIR!

Cut off tentacles before aicd can consume and reach main body.

Prey's tentacles drip with aicd.

Return to ground. Flying consumes biomass.

So hungry.

Prey watches main body. Eye tentacles watch back.

More unpleasantness in brain. But still no pain.

Develop claws on ends of tentacles. Develop endurance muscle.

“~~Impo/s/sible. Qu/er/y: How/ di/d you/ /resist this one's/ me/nt/al assault?/~~”

Smug. Must be strange attack. Ineffective.

Main body is superior design.

Lengthen tentacles.

Fly fly fly fly PIERCE!

Prey flies, but is too slow. Tentacles grab prey’s main body.

Prey wraps tentacles in its tentacles, secreting more aicd.

PAAAAINNNNN! PAAAAINNN! BUT MUST NOT LET GO! DRAG PAIN PAIN PAIN DRAG PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN DRAG PIERCE!

Tentacles pierce through eye. Prey STILL **LIVES!?**

STAB! PAIN! STAB! STAB PAIN PAIN STAB STAB PAIN STAB STAB STAB STAB!

Prey stills.

PAAIIINNN!

AICD ON MAIN BODY! EATING THROUGH ARMOR!

REMOVE ARMOR! SEVER TENTACLES! SEVER PIECE OF MAIN BODY!

Relief.

Aicd removed. 60% reduction in main body, 80% loss of tentacles. But lived. Even through COWARD aicd.

Now…

EAT! EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT ALL THINGS NOT AICD TENTACLES EAT!

…

Core?

INTERFERER ENTERS!

HIDE CORE IN MAIN BODY!

MOVE!

Home. Safe.

Interferer looks at prey. Looks at main body.

Wave tentacles. Smug.

Eaten.

Interferer approaches.

NO! WAS GOOD! MOVED!

MOVE TO CORNER.

Interferer stops.

Relief.

Home closes.

No poking instrument pain.

Happy.

Wiggle.

“My god doctor. X1 wasn’t even phased by the Observer’s pisonic blasts.”

“Doc… I think X1 might have to be purged.”

ANGRY! KNOW MR. STANDESH COMMUNICATED THAT! KNOW IT IN CORE!

“... success.”

“Sir?”

“Doc?”

“X1… is an unprcedeented success. Eevryone, do you know what this means!?”

“That the cute edlritch abmontaion might kill all the poor blokes who work here in their sleep?”

“That I should be really grateful for the life inusrance policy I took?”

“That lab three can - taking a page out of Rose’s book here - suck our collective dicks?”

“That we finally have a reliable means of closing the fucking Rifts? Ah, apologies-”

“YES! THANK YOU, Rose. When we first began this project, the goal was simply to see if Rift flesh mutations were worth exploring. But this is definitive proof! That I was right, and the Colonel was a fool! Ha ha! Ha ha ha! HAHAHAHA!”

“Doc, your morals! Your morals and snaity are leaking!”

“Ahem! Thank you Carl. On the other hand, we’ve neglected the other side of X1’s unique mutations. It’s immediate claoric absorption and epxlosive regeneration potential. This could leap us forwards hu…”

Bored.

But pleasant.

50% increase in main body size. 30% increase in tentacles, after damage. And...

New structure: Acidic glands, corrosion immunic tissue, fluid secretion tracts, developed brain.

Acid glands! KNEW IT! COWARDICE!

…

And brain…

…

Reluctant…

Prey's brain is… superior design.

Annoyance.

But!

Main body is superior in all other ways! Killed prey! *And* doesn't use coward acid!

Happy!

Wiggle.

Processing speed increased with simple brain.

How much increase with developed brain?

Remove simple brain.

Create developed brain.

…

Mmm…

Processing speed increased considerably… this one thinks?

…

Thinking like the previous prey. Disdain. Don’t want to.

Still… ideas are flooding inside of the main body.

Instead of simply using the teeth tentacles to grab, why not use them to shred? Grab prey, and vibrate tentacles?

Or use the clawed tip tentacles as a hook to lock prey in place, fly up in air, and drop them?

Interesting.

Wiggle.

This new brain is good. A much superior design when compared to the simple brain.

Only problem is… it CONSUMES TOO MUCH BIOMASS!

Was curious why previous prey - the Observer, interferers called it - did not develop other structures. Now understand why. Brain consumes biomass at an alarming rate, too much to keep other structures functional for long periods of time.

For now, must remove legs, wings, and excess tentacles. Conserve as much biomass as possible.

Also… inspect new Core.

Remove the new Core from main body, and place it on the ground.

Unsure of what to do with it. If interferers find it, they'll most likely keep. Don't want that.

…

Idea? No, not an idea. An…

Instinct.

Place new Core inside of body.

Consume.

…!

AGONY!

PAIN INSIDE OF CORE! DANGEROUS! IF CORE IS DAMAGED, WILL DIE!

BUT TOO LATE!

FOCUS ON NEW CORE. FOCUS ON FUSION!

…

…

Tired.

Information is flooding brain, core is undamaged, but… tired...

Sta-

!

“-triple the usual biomass. On second thought, make this amount the new standard.”

BIOMASS IS COMING!

Move… to feed.

Devour... offered biomass.

Tired.

“*~~T/hank you.~~.. ~~doc/!/~~!*”

“... Alright, really, no one else heard that?”

“Doc, you feeling alright? It feels like you ask something like that every day now.”

“Surely one of you did. Devon?”

“No sir?”

“Rose?”

“Not a damn thing. Apologies for the language.”

“...Carl?”

“Nope. But hey, look at this sketch I made of the bugger with a flower on its head. Pretty cute, huh?

“...Carl, perhaps some time away from X1 would be best. I’ll be assigning you to lab two for the time being.”

“What!? Noooo!”

Mmm…

Maybe… with new brain…

Can escape?

…

Stasis.

…

Chapter 6: Joint Testing

…

Loud.

Awake! Out of stasis!

Hungry.

Developed brain consumes too much biomass! Whyyyy!?

Objectively, this one… stop it. Don’t like thinking like kin-prey.

Know why developed brain consumes so much. Processing speed greatly increased, ideas constantly flowing. But still, why? Inefficient. Annoyed.

…

Idea.

Maybe only use developed brain when the main body is in danger? Keep simple brain for other times?

Mmm… Possibility. Requires further deliberation.

“X1, move to testing grounds.”

Think more later. For now, move to edge of home.

Home opens. Move to center of testing grounds.

Wave eye tentacles. Push against clear walls of testing grounds - glass? Recall interferers calling it such earlier - and discover that…! Still not free.

Only slightly disappointed.

But more interferers now.

Many more.

Strange.

New interferer and Doc are displaying aggressive behaviors. No cowardice.

“Hoh hoh hoh! I’d forgotten how… quaint, lab one’s research facility was. It’s rather cozy. I must say, being in a lab with so little equipment is refreshing in a way. It reminds me of when I first began working here.”

“Indeed. Being able to produce such a promising test subject despite not being equipped with the latest technology like lab three has been an eye opening process for me. Quality of our researchers over the quantity of your equipment truly is the most valuable thing, wouldn’t you agree? Ha ha!”

… Strange. Such aggressive behaviors, but no violence? It would seem the interferers are engaging in a battle of some kind. Superior design?

“Tsk. Still as arrogant as ever, Doctor Rester.”

“And still the prick I remember, Junior Researcher Grant.”

“Ah, it seems you’re going senile Doctor. I completed my doctorate quite some time ago.”

“Ah, forgive this old mind of mine. It keeps reminiscing on when you were the starry eyed new whelp that first walked through our doors.”

“Here you are Doctor. The energy consumption levels of X1 during

inter-testing periods that you requested."

"Thank you Rose."

"Ah, Ms. Cavish! Apologies for the rather sudden transference to lab one. I hope you're doing well?"

"I'm doing quite well, Doctor Grant. Working here has been fucking spectacular in comparison to lab three. Doctor Rester truly is the fucking genius I've always heard of. No apologies for my language."

"Ha!"

"... right."

"I'll be returning to my station, Doctor Rester."

"Please do, Rose. Perhaps we should begin, Junior Re- right, sorry, Doctor Grant?"

"Indeed. I truly hope our specimen - one of many, I might add - doesn't end up terminating... X1, you call it? That would be a shame, you only have the one, after all."

"It certainly will be interesting to observe what new structures X1

attains after consuming your specimen. What was it again? The Shadow Stalker?"

"... wait, go back to your previous statement. What do you mean it attains new structures?"

"Oh, you didn't hear? X1's Core ability is absorbing and retaining the structure of anything it eats. We haven't been able to discern what his secondary Core ability is, however."

"...Doctor Rester, X1 hasn't developed a brain has it?"

"Of course not. We removed that function when we observed it was growing one."

"... let's just begin the test."

Mmm. It seems the battle has ended. Unsure who won.

Vibrations in air.

Prey?

Must prepare.

Develop all structures used against previous prey. Refine all structures. Develop acid… no. Is cowardice. Won't use, even if… reluctant to admit.

Even if superior design.

Frustrated. IS COWARDICE! WILL NOT USE!

But will develop corrosion immunic tissue.

Pleasant.

ACID NO LONGER WILL HARM MAIN BODY! SATISFACTION!

Mmm… New brain develops structures faster. Much faster.

Thinking of… sort through information provided by combining new Core with original Core.

New Core abilities: Psionic link. Psionic assault. Minor Telekinesis. (Active use consumes Core energy).

Mmm…

Uncertain how to utilize. Must test against prey. But telekinesis…

Is this how the kin-prey flew? Even with no wings?

But kin-prey was slow. Inferior design to wings. Unless…

Idea.

Influence prey with telekinesis?

Must test when possibl-

PAIN!

Legs attacked!

But from where!?

Where is prey!?

Wave eye tentacles, search for newest prey.

Can’t find. There is no prey?

PAIN!

One eye tentacle severed.

But NO PREY!?

NO STRANGE STRUCTURES!?

IMPOSSI-

PAAAIIIINNN!

Right foreleg has been severed.

50% of mass is resting on remaining foreleg, main foreleg sinking. Must repair right foreleg.

Relief. Stop sinking.

…

Prey hides from sight.

Unsure how, prey is here, but not visible.

COWARDICE!

Prey still must make some form of sound. All preys do.

Remove audio perceptor.

Develop auditory nervous system.

Legs and paws step against ground. In circling pattern around main body.

Sounds stop.

SOUNDS APPROACH! FAST! BUT FROM WHERE!?

PAIN!

Left foreleg has been severed STAB!

Missed. Sounds resume, circling around main body.

Mmm…

Remove all structures except for armor, brain and auditory nervous system.

IS COWARDICE, BUT MUST!

Hide.

Developed brain is thinking at maximum speed.

Can’t see prey.

Can’t predict where prey will be.

How to find this COWARD prey that hides from sight?

…

IDEA!

Develop tentacles, endurance muscle, twitch muscle, teeth on tentacles, refine endurance and twitch muscles, sharpen tentacles, sharpen teeth, refine endurance muscles again, lengthen tentacles.

Main body shrinks by 78%. But 300% increase in usual tentacle amount.

Remove armor. Main body restores in size by 20%

Search for prey with tentacles. Tentacles blanket testing grounds.

“Well that’s absolutely horrifying. You sure we can’t purge X1?”

SHUT UP MR. STANDESH! CONCENTRATING!

The circling sounds have paused. Vibrations in air.

SEND ALL TENTACLES TO VIBRATIONS!

FOUND! SATISFACTION!

GRAB!

Prey struggles. Is surprisingly large, larger than main body, even after shrinkage. Tentacles are **PAAAAAIIIINNNN** severed in large amounts. DOES NOT MATTER!

VIBRATE TENTACLES. REND FLESH! TEAR APART!

SHRRIIIEEEEKKK!

Smug. Does not matter, your distressed sounds.

TEAR!

RIP!

CRUSH!

Prey stills.

Is finally visible to eye tentacles.

Recognize structure. Forelegs, hindlegs, same body as earlier prey

that had these structures. Four eyes on head structure, nose.

But two structures on either side of main body. Similar to tentacles in nature, but tips end in long claw-like structures.

Drag to main body.

EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT EAT CORE! HIDE CORE! EAT EAT EAT!

…

No interferers enter testing grounds?

…

Strange.

Move back to home anyways?

Home closes.

Smug.

Ate all of prey. Remove excess tentacles, but leave usual amount remaining. 100% increase in main body size. Enough biomass to keep all structures functional during stasis.

“Doctor… I know I’m usually biased against X1, but I think you’ve created something truly horrifying here. We should probably kill it just to be safe, before it murders everyone here.”

SHUT! UP! MR! STANDESH!

“You know, Hunt is usually an idiot-”

“Hey…”

“- but for once I share his sentiment. X1 may become uncontrollable in the near future. Perhaps releasing it upon the Rift soon is the best course of action?”

Rift?

This communication has occurred rather often recently.

Curious.

What is Rift?

“Well Doctor Grant!? HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT! HAHAHAHA!”

“He’s not listening to us.”

“… well Doctor Rester. Congratulations. X1 barely succeeded-”

“Barely!?”

“Fuck you Doctor Grant. No apologies-”

“-in terminating our *weakest* specimen. Maybe another joint test in the future is appropriate?”

“Gladly, *Junior Researcher* Grant. Good day.”

“Tsk.”

…

New structure: Scything tentacles, complete quadrupedal skeletal system, vascular system, digestive tract, compacted pink tissue

muscle system, complete musculature system.

And new Core.

But...

Still hungry here. Please give biomass?

“What’s up guys? I just got a break from my jig over in lab two. Passed by the lab three blokes on my way here… aww, did I miss the test? Can’t believe I missed the bugger in action. How did he do?”

“Yo.”

“Greetings.”

“You missed it, yes. Speaking of, Doctor, did you hear what we were saying?”

“Yes. But X1 is currently too valuable of a specimen to release. Still, perhaps a new addition to the X-series is in order. To establish a new baseline.”

“Doc, no offense, but that’s a terrible idea.”

“And that is why you are currently regulated to security detail, Mr. Standesh.”

“Doc, I did some thinking, and I really think we should give X1 a tophat. Don’t you-”

“Carl, go back to lab two.”

“... come on Doc, please?”

“No. And Devon, feed-”

FEED! Satisfaction!

“-the new standard amount of biomass.”

“...Doctor, we were actually thinking, we should probably release X1 to the Rift.”

“And remove further chances of testing? I think not.”

“...Doctor, you saw what X1 did, right?”

“I did, and it was perfect.”

“...sure doc.”

While waiting for biomass, combine Cores.

PAINNNN!

New Core ability: Invisibility (Active use consumes Core energy).

Biomass comes.

Devour.

“~~T/hank-/y/ou-Do/ctor/~~”

“That’s it! Devon, give me all of the audio logs from X1’s inter-testing chambers for the past 186 hours.”

"Yes, Doctor."

Stasis.

...

Chapter 7: The Class 7 Entity

“-and then that *bitch* Morgana had the *nerve* to imply that if I had raised Sariel appropriately this wouldn’t have happened! As if *mySariel* was the issue here, not her gutter trash way of raising her own god damned daughter. On the last day of her middle school as well!”

Doctor Alexander Rester sighed, rubbing the increasingly creased lines of his forehead as his daughter ranted about the latest incident between Sariel and Aurora. As much as he loved his granddaughter, any way he looked at it, objectively Sariel was in the wrong here.

Honestly, using psychokinesis to make the young lady piss herself during an argument? As proud as he was that she had accomplished such a feat, using such an ability on a regular civilian, a *local* on top of that, *was* problematic. Even if in his *definitely* unbiased opinion everything he heard about Aurora indicated that the young lady deserved it.

“You didn’t cause a scene, did you?” He asked reluctantly, already afraid of the answer.

“Of course not.” His daughter replied indignantly, and for a moment relief washed through him.

“Well that’s goo-”

“I just did what any good mother would do. I took off my earrings

and told her to meet me in the parking lot, and promptly kicked her ass."

He groaned. "Your combat training isn't meant to be used for beating up women in parking lots, sweetie."

"But dad-"

"No buts! And I *know* Hardin isn't on either of your sides here, otherwise you wouldn't be calling me. Which should tell you *something*. If nothing else, that husband of yours has a good head on his shoulders." He firmly rebutted, and he heard a sigh on the other end of the circlet.

"... okay, maybe you're right. I'll bake a cake or something. *Sorry my family's better than yours-"*

"Lexi!"

"Fine! Gah! I'll pay for the medical bills, and apologize." She grumbled.

"Medical bills!?" He shouted, voice climbing an octave.

"Nothing serious!" She hurriedly reassured her father, which of course did nothing of the sort. "Just a trip to the local healer. You can't even tell she was missing any teeth now."

Doctor Rester sighed again, now taking off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Just… promise me this is the last time our family will ever interact with them again.”

Alexandra Nesiphero laughed, the tone surprisingly pleasant even if her personality was anything but. To people she didn’t like, at least.

“Of course. Sariel is going to be attending the Academy come this fall, so she shouldn’t have any more incidents with non-Gifted or unmutated individuals. Unprovoked, at least.” She said, the pride evident in her voice.

“Civilians.” Alexander corrected for what felt like the thousandth time. “The non-problematic term for them is just civilians, sweetheart.”

Another laugh. “Oh, right, did you want to talk to her?” Alexandra asked, and the Doctor immediately perked up, his frown dissolving into a smile.

“As long as she wants to.” He said.

“Of course she does. Sarah, sweetheart, it’s grandpa!”

He heard some muffled grumbling as his daughter covered the transceiver on the circlet, before a new voice greeted him as the line was switched between the two devices.

“Hey grandpa.” His granddaughter said somewhat reluctantly. He chuckled, having had the experience of being forced to talk with his own grandparents before.

“Hello sweet pea. I heard you had another incident with Aurora today.” He began, and heard the shocked gasp and betrayed *‘Mooom’*.

“Okay, before you get mad, she *totally* deserved it this time, I swear. She just wouldn’t stop picking on Gas-”

“It’s okay Sarah,” he assured her, “I’m not mad. If anything, your mom was the crazy one in this situation.” A laugh came over the device, high and clear.

“Oh yeah, she went over the deep end. Grandma had to stop her before she started kicking Aurora’s mom.”

Doctor Rester shook his head ruefully. A grown woman, nearly curb stomping another grown woman over a child’s argument. If he didn’t love his daughter so much, he might think she was psychotic. For the life of him he couldn’t figure out who she got it from.

“Now, this isn’t a lecture. But remember what me and your dad said about using your abilities on civilians.” He reminded her in what he

hoped was a non-lecturing tone.

“Oh, you didn’t hear? Aurora mutated, like, a week ago. That’s the only reason she started picking on Gaster, she thought she could take me on.” There was a somehow dignified snort from Sariel.

Oh. Well that certainly changed a few things.

“In that case, good job sweet pea. Just make sure your father checks on her from afar that it wasn’t permanent. Psionic abilities can still be unpredictable at your age.” He instructed, and heard some sort of displeased but confirmative grunt.

“Alright, I won’t take up too much of your time. I love you sweet pea. I’m hanging up now.”

“Alright, love you too grandpa. Wait! When are you coming to visit?” She hurriedly asked before he ended the call, and the Doctor paused.

“I don’t know. Work has been… busy, lately. But I’ll try to make it to your induction ceremony.” He replied hesitantly.

“Okay… bye grandpa, love you!”

“Wait, Sariel, transfer the line back to my circlet before-”

The call ended with a sad little *boop*, and the Doctor placed his circlet back on his desk, next to the piles of papers and stacks of various folders that littered it.

The contents of them ranged anywhere from life vitals of X1 to budgetary concerns his team had brought him. The stack of reports drew another sigh from him, exhaustion already creeping back into his old bones, but he placed his glasses back on his face and began to settle back into the rhythm of his work.

Knock knock knock.

Startled, he set down the folder he had just begun to sort through. Pushing out his mind, he saw a figure he recognized just beyond the door.

“It’s unlocked!” He called, and the metallic door of his office slowly pushed open to reveal a rather tall, moderately good looking grey-skinned and dark grey haired youth with wire-framed glasses, and the customary white lab coat and badge that read ‘Lab Assistant.’ Gangly limbs carried him into the Doctor’s office as he clutched two full, brown paper bags in one hand, grease spots already staining the bottom, and two thermoses in the other.

“Ah, Devon. What brings you in?” The Doctor asked, and Devon flashed him a smile.

“Just got back from Jodie’s. I figured you hadn’t eaten yet, so I bought you some food too. Fried ungal, for a full day’s work.” He

replied in the trademarked melodic voice all nuans tended to have.

The Doctor nodded appreciatively, hunger that he hadn't even noticed making his stomach rumble as he hurriedly stood and cleared off papers from two padded chairs for them to eat.

They both sat down and immediately began eating, paper bags resting in their laps as they devoured their food. Devon wordlessly passed over a thermos, filled to the brim with hot dark coffee, which the Doctor took and sipped from between bites.

Food mostly eaten, they both relished the small break they had from their work, their bags set aside and resting on the floor as they cradled their thermoses in their hands.

The Doctor inspected Devon and, despite having lived beyond the Rift for decades now, was still fascinated by the distinctly humanoid features of the nuans. Aside from being taller on average than humans, the lengthened limbs and digits of their extremities, the grey skin and differing shades of white to dark blue hair, nearly everything else about a nuan was nearly identical to a human. Which was quite frankly absurd, considering that they weren't carbon based lifeforms. Very little on Stillera was.

"You're doing it again sir." Devon remarked, snapping him out of his reverie. The Doctor cleared his throat, coughing awkwardly and sipping from his thermos.

"Apologies, Devon. And thank you for the food."

Devon only smiled, his gaze wandering over the Doctor's humble office. The Doctor's eyes wandered with his, taking in the small space, only 3 meters wide and 4 meters long, when entering from the door. Bookshelves lined the stone walls, packed full with white binders and beige folders. The Doctor's own desk was a cluttered mess, the very definition of 'organized chaos'. The two chairs they were sitting on sat opposite of the desk, sharing the space with the rest of the shelves.

"Oh, right, I have the audio logs you asked for earlier today." Devon seemed to recall, and the Doctor nodded.

"Much appreciated. Please email them over to me at your earliest convenience."

"Already done." The youth said, tapping the circlet around his neck, and the Doctor grinned. It had only been two years since Devon was assigned to his team, now the longest remaining member after all the other's government contracts had expired, and he was proving far more capable than any other he had worked with. As if remembering something, the Doctor spoke.

"Oh right, I've been meaning to ask. How's your thesis coming along? It was based on interactions between mutated vs. developed Cores, if I recall?" He inquired, and Devon shook his head ruefully.

"I've hit somewhat of a block, sir. I was actually hoping to discuss it with you later, over a couple of drinks if that's alright."

The Doctor smiled and nodded, while Devon continued. “But for now,” He began, “I wanted to talk about X1. For the first four weeks of its life cycle, its’ progress was somewhat stalled. But over the past several days, its growth has increased explosively. We all know about Hunt’s… insistence about disposing of X1-”

This drew a wry chuckle from the Doctor, as he recalled the terror X1 instilled in Mr. Standesh.

“-but the rest of the team, save Carl, also have their own concerns about X1. It has a somewhat pavlovian response to us entering its testing grounds, but what happens when it overcomes its instinctive fear of us? When we start looking like its next source of biomass? I care about X1, Doctor, you know I do, which is why I’m suggesting we release it to the closest Rift instead of purging it. I worry that any fu-”

The Doctor held up a hand, stopping Devon from continuing.

“Devon, what category would you place X1 in?” He inquired, causing Devon to frown thoughtfully.

“Well… with its obvious shapeshifting ability, I’d mark it as a category one.” He ventured, and the Doctor nodded. He twisted around in his seat, searching through one of the folders on his desk until he pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it over to Devon.

Devon inspected it for a moment, his eyes growing wider and wider until he let out a shocked gasp.

“4.3 debicules of existence!?” He exclaimed. “Psionic pressure of 1.3 astrobules!?” He looked up at the Doctor, who nodded somewhat… smugly.

“Those results were taken during its last physical examination.” He explained, reaching out and grabbing the sheet out of Devon’s hands, placing it back in its folder.

“But sir, that shouldn’t be possible!”

Again, the Doctor nodded, a smile creeping onto his face. “Indeed, it shouldn’t be. But it is. Those tests were run three times, 30 minutes apart from each other. The first time, its debicules tested for 4.22999. The second time, 4.229 repeating. And the third, 4.3. X1’s psionic pressure had a much lower increase, but still observable within the .00001 range. What does this tell you?”

Devon shook his head, disbelief painted across his expression. “But sir, X1 hasn’t displayed any characteristics of a category 2, much less a category 4!”

“Yet.” The Doctor corrected. “X1 hasn’t displayed them *yet.*” He suddenly leaned forwards, a manic fervor flashing through his eyes, causing Devon to flinch back. Passive psionic pressure weighed down on Devon’s mind, slowing down his thinking. “You surely must have an idea what the implications of this are. A growing entity. Possibly a category 6, if it does begin to display those characteristics. A possible growth class 2, category 6 entity that *we control!* Not only is this a possible solution to the Rifts, X1 could solve most modern science problems. I’m now somewhat regretful that we gimped its ability to grow a brain. If we *hadn’t*, Devon? What then? X1 could have propelled us forwards decades, no, centuries!”

Devon leaned back, having forgotten the Doctor's… intensity. But still… hope flared through him. If X1 really could be what those numbers indicated…

"LOCKDOWN! LOCKDOWN! LOCKDOWN!" A voice blared through the intercom, causing both of them to jump. They looked up wildly at the intercom system located in the corner of the Doctor's office. "SECURITY BREACH IN LAB THREE! CLASS 3, CATEGORY 4 RIFT ENTITY HAS ESCAPED FROM ITS HOLDING CELL! LOCKDOWN! LOCKDOWN! LOCKDOWN!"

The Doctor and Devon both looked at each other, surprise and mirth in their expressions.

"Lab three again? This is the second time in three months." The Doctor laughed wryly, shaking his head, the manic light in his eyes already fading. "And they say they're the only competent team. Devon, get the door, would y-"

"EVACUATE! EVACUATE! EVACUATE! SECURITY BREACH IN LAB THREE! CLASS 7, CATEGORY 6 RIFT ENTITY HAS BEEN SIGHTED IN LAB THREE! TERMINATE ALL TEST SUBJECTS WITHIN THE NEXT TWO MINUTES! EVACUATE, EVACUATE, EVACUATE!"

Devon and the Doctor both looked at each other again, but this time with stark terror.

“My God.” The Doctor whispered.

And then they both exploded upwards, running for the door.

Chapter 8: The Predator

…

LOUD!

SO! LOUD!

PAIN!

REMOVE AUDITORY NERVOUS SYSTEM!

Frustrated. Remember when last developed auditory nervous system, the loud caused pain. Why didn't this one remove it before stasis? Idiocy!

Develop audio perceptors.

STILL LOUD!

REMOVE AUDIO PERCEPTORS!

Strange.

The loud is never this much. Or last this long. Different from usual loud.

…

Home is already open?

…

Hesitant.

Something is… different.

Move to edge of home. Cautious. Patient.

The testing grounds are same. Move eye tentacles outwards, observe.

… the walls of home are different. Fractures, cuts, holes throughout.

Move to testing grounds, wave eye tentacles.

No interferers?

Very strange.

Light flashing through interferers home, constantly.

Push tentacle through hole…

Free?

FREE!

Wiiiigggllleee!

Finally free! And no interferers to stop this one!

Hurry! Before interferers return!

Find hole big enough for main body to fit through. Was able to maintain all previous structures during stasis. Walls look sharp, develop armor on main body and legs.

Muscles in legs tense, main body lowering to ground.

Jump!

Landed on other sid-

PAAAINNN!

PAIN NEXT TO CORE, UNDERNEATH SKIN!

PAAAAAIIIIIINNNNNN!

SMALL STRUCTURE NEXT TO CORE! CAUSES SAME PAIN AS POKING INSTRUMENTS!

PAAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNNN!

REMOVE!

Main body turns inside out, churning, until small structure *plops* onto ground.

Crush!

Small structure reduced to nothing.

Satisfaction.

No more pain.

Did not notice structure because was close to Core. Must pay more attention to main body in the future.

Quickly scan area with eye tentacles.

Still no interferers.

Wiggle.

Begin moving towards opening in interferer's home…

Stop.

Did not think of what to do after free.

After becoming free, what does this one… do?

Interferers provide biomass, prey, new structures, new Cores.

Cannot guarantee this one will be able to find those things outside of home.

Mmm…

But perhaps there is *more* of these things outside of home?

Remember the long periods of **hunger.**

And **pain.**

Lots of **pain.**

Affirmation. This one must become more free. Find new prey. New structures and Cores.

Must grow.

Resolved. Move outside of opening into bigger space.

The ground is strange, outside of home and testing grounds. Harder.

Puts more strain against movement structures.

Continue moving.

The flashing lights continue, see structures on ceiling that provide such lights. Comes and goes, dark grey becoming light grey. Strange.

… vibrations in air.

Prey?

Hungry.

MOVE!

Forelegs churn, run down bigger space, turn, continue running, turn PREY!

Mmm… five prey. Strange, they are huddled together around something. Eating.

Recognize structures. Fur, sharper teeth, quadrupedal skeletal structures, claws, complex olfactory system, complex auditory nervous system.

THE COWARD PREY THAT RELIES ON OTHERS! **HATE** THEM! ATTAAAACKKK!

Tentacles erupt outside of main body, sprint to prey. They heard the noise from main body, their fur bristles, bared teeth, auditory nervous system structure on head flattens, vibrations in air from prey.

Intimidation tactic. Does not matter.

Hungry.

ATTTAACCKK!

Pounce on closest prey, striking head with the armored mass of main body. Prey's head collapses inwards, splashing main body with fluid. Prey stills, collapses to ground. Stab two other prey with all tentacles. PIERCE HEAD, MOVEMENT STRUCTURES, BODIES!

Tentacles enter their bodies. RIP OUT TENTACLES! CAUSE ADDITIONAL DAMAGE WITH TEETH WHEN TENTACLES LEAVE BODY!

Both preys still, collapse to ground.

Remaining two preys pounce onto main body, sharper teeth and claws scratching against the armor.

Smug.

Does not pierce armor, but **pain** as they sever tentacles at roots.

Angry.

Move foreleg, scratch against body of one prey with claws. Prey lets out distressed sound, weakness! Attack with all tentacles!

Tentacles pierce body from all sides. Vibrate tentacles, cause major damage to internal structures.

Shrieeek!

Your distressed sounds do not matter to this one.

Prey stills.

Other prey runs.

COWARDICE!

Send out tentacles, wrap around hindlegs.

Constrict!

Crack!

Yelp!

Prey's hindlegs are crushed. Drag prey towards main body.

Prey twists, biting at tentacles with sharper teeth.

PAIN! Tentacles are severed.

But does not matter. Prey's movement structures are crippled.

Wrap rest of tentacles around prey's body.

Constrict!

CRACCKK!

Multiple cracking sounds. Prey stills.

Smug. Killed all prey, only lost 10% of tentacles, no damage to main body.

Satisfaction!

Vindication!

Much superior design than prey.

Wiggle.

Devour.

…

...strange.

Ate three of the preys, not hungry anymore. In fact, more than not hungry. Even with 130% increase in main body size.

What is strange feeling?

Frustrated. Must eat remainder of prey. Waste of biomass if don't.

Remember structure! Develop digestive tract!

…

When structure is complete, information enters brain.

Digestive tract is… inferior design, to how main body already processes biomass. Does not utilize 100% of biomass gained. Produces waste.

Hmm…

Idea!

Instead of digesting prey, stomachs and intestines will preserve prey within main body, release biomass when needed. Will also stop micro-structures that are already consuming prey.

Idea can work!

But to stop micro-structures from consuming prey… idea requires…

Acid.

HATE!

IS COWARDICE!

But will waste biomass if don't…

Frustrated.

Mmm…

Should not be cowardice if… don't use acid to attack? Only for storing biomass?

Right?

Reluctant, but…

Develop altered digestive tract! Develop… acid glands.

Ugh. Hate already. But is necessary.

Devour.

All prey consumed. Minute amounts of biomass already being released to main body.

Satisfaction! Idea worked!

Tired…

But *must not* enter stasis. If interferers return while outside of home…

Shake.

Must look for place where no interferers are.

Thinking of…

Wave eye tentacles to inspect what prey were eating.

Not much remains. Only bones, half of which have been consumed.

Don’t recognize bone structure. Therefore, must be new!

Consume.

New structure: Complete mutated canine anatomy (Mutated canine arterial circulatory system, organ syst...), Partial bipedal skeletal system (Tibia, fibula, tarsus, ulna, rad…)

Tired.

But must not enter stasis!

Move, to stay out of stasis.

Occasionally pass by open areas, wave eye tentacles to inspect. Strange, filled with objects and structures, but ends there. Continue.

Pass by one open area. Pause.

Familiar…

Wave eye tentacle.

Shake.

The area where parts of main body are removed.

Don’t like! Moving on!

… vibrations in air.

Lots of vibrations.

Prey?

MOVE!

Legs churn again, sprint. Turn, sprint more, turn…

Lots. And lots. Of vibrations.

Pause.

Maybe okay now to develop audio perceptor?

NOPE! STILL LOUD!

Tur-

Still.

Confusion.

Interferers lay on ground, lots of black fluid (blood, know now) pooling around them. Their forms are still. Unmoving.

… strange.

Why aren't interferers moving?

Poking instruments and other structures around them. But interferers are still.

Interferers… killed?

Impossible. Interferers not prey, so can't be killed. Simple.

Vibrations in air.

Wave eye tentacles.

Interferer! Turning to enter current area!

…

Interferer was yanked backwards? By… tentacle?

Should not be possible.

Confusion.

More vibrations in air.

Another figure turns to enter current area.

Recognize! Kin-prey! Observer!

Confident. Move forward. Kill kin-prey, consu-

Fear.

Main body stops. Pressure on brain. Hard to think. But…

Terror.

WAVE EYE TENTACLES! WHAT IS CAUSING FEAR!? WHAT IS-

Another figure turns to enter current area, just behind. BIG!

New figure is completely dark. Light is pulled into it, destroyed. Vibrations in air all around it. Walks like interferers do, on hind legs. But no front movement structures. Four tentacles, holding still interferer. And all around it…

Eyes. Floating. The area around the new figure is strange, distorted, can't make it out.

PAIN!

Pain in brain. But why!?

The new figure's tentacles mo-

VIBRATIONS! BEHIND!

Move eye tentacle, inspect. Interferer that was in the new figure's tentacles lays there, missing legs and front movement structures. HOW!? WHEN!? BRAIN DIDN'T EVEN PROCESS!

But know how.

When looking at the new figure, brain and the main body are filled with…

Terror.

Still. Hide. Grow smaller. Instinct tells main body that it must not engage with the new figure. Because the new figure is not prey. The new figure is…

Predator.

Predator's eyes all look at main body. Shrink more. **FEAR!**

"How strange, to meet one of your kind here. I've not seen one of you in a long time. When were you taken from our Home, little one? Well… no matter. I've descended to return all of us Home. So come. Now.

Predator moves towards main body.

NOOOPE!

NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE DON'T LIKE NOPE!!!

TURN AND FLEE! IS COWARDICE! BUT ACCEPTABLE COWARDICE!

FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE FLEE!

FEEL TENTACLE GRAB HINDLEG!?

NOOOOOPE! SEVER HIND LEG, REGENERATE AND KEEP RUNNING!

RUN PAST PREY! RUN PAST STILL INTERFERERS! RUN PAST IT ALL!

FLEEEEEE!

ESCAPE FROM THE PREDATOR!

STRUCTURE UP AHEAD! IMPEDES PROGRESS FORWARDS!

STAB WITH ALL TENTACLES. *CLUB*. *REND*. *TEAR*. FINALLY IT OPENS!

FLEE!

NEW AREA IS BIG! BIIIIIG BIG. BUT NO TIME TO INSPECT. MUST KEEP MOVING.

MUST. ESCAPE.

Chapter 9: The Forest

Finally, the pressure on this one's - GAH! STOP THINKING LIKE KIN-PREY!

The pressure on the brain finally stops, and processing speed returns to normal.

Frustrated.

Had thought main body was the superior design to all others… reluctant.

… Besides interferers, they still have superior design.

Not counting interferers, thought the main body was the predator. But… now realize mistake.

Main body can still be prey to others.

Displayed cowardice, fled from the predator. And all the fleeing has completely emptied the biomass in the main body's stomach.

FRUSTRATED!

Biomass was meant to keep structures functional!

And **tired**.

But before main body can enter stasis, must observe surroundings.

Wave eye tentacles, inspect.

As originally thought.

BIG! TOO BIG!

And the ceiling is so high! Calculating…

Could exhaust all of biomass attempting to fly up to ceiling, and still the main body wouldn't touch it. How!?

And the light source! So bright! Eye tentacles can't observe directly without pain!

And that is only the ceiling. Can't see walls, no matter which direction tentacles wave in.

Additionally, there are strange structures all around the main body. Can't calculate how many. And structures are big too! Can wrap tentacles around, but the structures are tall! With even more miniature versions of the structures that extend outwards from it! With even smaller, different structures attached to them!

Shake.

Can't comprehend. Is it possible home is… tiny?

But testing grounds were so big!

Vibrations in air.

Wave eye tentacle, look for source.

Recognize structure, feathers, wings, beak. Small.

Small prey is resting on one of the miniature structures, head tilted to the side as eye structures.

Mmm… Not too high. Tentacle can still reach.

STAB!

Prey starts, tentacle was too slow, begins to fly NO MUST CATCH STAB!

Prey stills. Relief. Prey almost escaped. Drag to main body.

Eat.

New structure: Complete avian (Songbird) anatomy (Avian skeletal system, trichromatic ocular system, syrinx, organ system, hormone pro…).

Information floods brain.

Tired.

So… tired.

Strange… analyzing new… structures… doesn't consume… biomass…

But… tired…

Instinct…

Consumes… Core… energy…

No shelter… but prey was… on structure...

Perhaps… climb structure…? Safe…?

Climb…

Remember… brain consumes… biomass… even in… stasis…

Remove...

Stasis.

…

…

Awake! Construct developed brain.

…

Strange. All previous structures have reverted back to main body.

Why?

…

Because not enough biomass?

Or because no brain?

Hmm… requires further testing.

Hungry.

Prey was too small to provide sufficient biomass. But before looking for more prey…

Analyze new information.

Two complete anatomies. Mutated canine (Hunting hound), and Avian (Songbird), as well as the partial bipedal skeletal structure.

Mmm… for now, ignore the bipedal structure. Not enough

information to construct accurately.

Never realized before, but analyzing and developing structures consumes Core energy. Will require further testing to determine by how much.

Calculating…

Core energy is at 98%.

Add new routine. Calculate core energy when from stasis, and when developing structures.

Satisfied. Good routine to have.

Wiggle.

Now… What structures to develop?

… want to attempt to develop complete anatomy. **Instinct** says developing the anatomy first, and then changing it will have superior results, but…

Hungry.

Not enough biomass to conduct tests.

For now, climb down from the structure (tree, now know after analyzing avian anatomy).

Develop forelegs and hindlegs, claws, semi-complete canine skeleton (sans spine, ribcage, and skull), red and white muscle tissue system (superior to endurance muscle and pink muscle, respectively. Satisfaction!), altered digestive tract, sharpen tentacles, teeth on tentacles, armor, and refine all.

Core energy is at 90%.

Interesting, but **hungry.**

To help search for prey… hmm…

Develop auditory nervous system, canine ears, olfactory system, canine nose.

SENSES OVERLOADED!

PAAAAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNNN! DEVELOPED BRAIN IS NOT USED TO SENSES!

PAAIIIINNNN! ENDURE THE PAIN! STRUCTURES ARE NECESSARY TO LOCATE PREY!

PAAIINN! IT IS LESSENING, BUT STILL! PAAIINN!

PAIN!

Pain!

Shake!

Relief.

Wiggle.

Pain is manageable now.

First… the noise. Not loud, but it is constant. Leaves rustle from formless force, constantly emitting noise. Preys communicate somewhere, adding to noise. Even main body's own micromovements cause noise.

Strange. Even when this one developed the auditory nervous system

before, it was not this overloading. Are ears the reason? Directing noise directly to the auditory system?

Feel the muscles in them twitching, constantly swiveling ears to pick up on new sources of noise. Good structure, even if causes pain.

And second, the olfactory system. Because this one didn't develop the canine head, it is not as potent, but still…

Strange sense. Does not pick up on sound, or sight, but something… else.

Sniff. Sniff sniff.

Can determine how fresh, or stale, a scent is. Can determine what is prey, and what is not.

Information enters brain, and is filtered out based on whether or not is it is possible prey or danger.

… Have strange urge to mark territory. But did not develop urinary tract, so cannot. Know it is inefficient, altered digestive tract is superior design, but… frustrated!

MUST LET PREY KNOW THIS IS MINE! AND THAT IS MINE! AND THAT OVER THERE IS MINE AS WELL! ALL OF IT IS MIIIINNNEEE!

But…

Hungry.

So hungry.

Ears swivel. Detected prey noise, rustling in distance.

Sniff.

Potent.

Fresh.

Move.

Legs propel main body forwards, tentacles lay flat against main body, prepared to strike.

Approaching prey. Lower legs and main body to stay close to ground, minimize noise.

…

WHAT!? THAT IS COWARDICE! MUST ANNOUNCE PRESENCE TO PREY, SO IT CAN FIGHT!

Develop lungs, respiratory tract. *HOWL*!

…

Prey… flees? COWARDICE! STAY AND FIGHT!

…

But wait, prey ran because of the main body's noise…

Perhaps… non-cowardice is idiocy?

…

NONSENSE! PREY IS JUST COWARD!

CHASE!

Legs propel main body forward, quickly catch up to prey. Smug, superior design.

Prey is actually rather slow.

…

Strange structures on prey's back. Sharp, many of them.

Well, no matter. Send out tentacles, wrap pr-

PAAAAAIIIIINNN!

SHARP STRUCTURES ON BACK PIERCE THROUGH TENTACLES!?

Can't attack!? COWARDICE! WHAT KIND OF PREY IS THIS!? NOT EVEN ARMOR!

Armor, this one can understand! Armor still lets prey attack, just inferior design if it cannot pierce. But to cause pain when attacking!?

FRUSTRATED!

Prey emits pleased noise.

HATRED!

Remove sharp structures from tentacles. Repair.

Wrap tentacles around sharp **PAINN** structures.

Constrict.

Yank!

All sharp structures removed at once.

Shrieeek!

Prey emits distressed noise.

Smug.

Wiggle.

Prey attempts to escape.

Cowardice to the end!?

Disgrace. Disgrace to all other prey!

Wrap.

Constrict!

Craaackkk!

Prey stills.

SATISFACTION!

Devour.

Smell three of the same prey, near this area.

Hatred.

KILL!

…

All other same prey killed and devoured.

New structure: Quills, Complete rodent (Porcupine) anatomy.

Satisfaction!

So they are porcupine!?

HATE MORE THAN ACID! WILL NOT REST UNTIL THIS ONE HAS KILLED ALL PORCUPINES!

Chapter 10: Pack Hunting

A note from Sonkoso

Heya! So, surprisingly I end up doing a lot of research for this book. Did you know that the hierarchy system for wolves wasn't established until 1945? And that the common Alpha, beta, gamma, etc. classifications only apply to wolves in captivity? This hierarchal structure doesn't typically appear in the wild.

Smug.

Last of the porcupine prey has been devoured.

Sniff.

Can’t smell any other porcupines nearby. Vengeance has been had, cowardice has been punished.

And the biomass this one has accrued…

Calculating…

If this one were to remain stationary, without movement, this one has approximately 13 stasises worth of biomass, even including the 43% increase to main body size. 4 stasises worth if all structures are maintained.

Which means that this one can finally experiment!

Satisfaction.

Wiggle.

… keep thinking like kin-prey. But happens too often to continuously correct.

No. Not even remembering the **arrogant**, *hated* kin-prey will cause unpleasantness for this one.

First, the trichromatic ocular system.

…

Reluctant.

Is not cowardice! This one is *definitely* not reluctant because new sensory organs cause pain!

Current sensory organs are optimal. More than optimal. Performance is much superior to only eye tentacles. Have no need for trichromatic ocular system right now.

That's all. Not cowardice.

Next… the complete anatomies.

Immediately ignore the porcupine anatomy. Disgusted, is cowardice.

Contemplate between songbird and hunting hound anatomies.

Songbird anatomy is… not useful, for hunting prey. Relies on wings, which consumes biomass much faster than legs, and aggressive structures are not supported. Also, small. Too small for the main body.

The hunting hound anatomy is the most similar to the structures this one has already been using. But there is one thing that this one doesn't understand.

Why do all anatomies use blood?

It is inefficient. Inferior design to the main body's.

…

But interferers used blood, remember it around them. And interferers were superior design.

Confused. Don't comprehend.

Hmm…

Requires testing. Won't know until this one develops the anatomy and observes.

Develop hunting hound anatomy! But retain altered digestive tract, restructure anatomy to incorporate it into its design.

…

Information floods the brain.

Hmm…

Strange urges. Find hierarchy, dominate or subserve into. Find mate, procreate. Find shelter, to protect from the elements. Establish territory.

There is a strange new sensation on this one's skin and fur. It is pleasant. Originates from the light source on the ceiling.

Warm.

Wiggle.

Wag tail.

Ignore all of the new urges and sensations, test range of motion.

Range of motion is more limited in this form. But overall structure is better. Supports the main body better.

Original main body and all tentacles are still existent, but in a small sac located to the right of this one's… lower back? Spinal cord?

Spinal cord stretches out into a tail. Interesting design, helps to maintain balance for quadrupedal structure.

Can feel the blood coursing through this one's vascular system. Interesting design, micro-structures make up the majority, three of which dominate the others. Blood is pumped through a heart, which is regulated and maintained by the brain, which maintains it's function though the air this one brings through its lungs. All of which support the other organs in the system, as well as the muscle systems and others.

Realization.

By dedicating a small portion of the brain to ensure all of the organs remain functiional, it consumes less biomass to maintain an anatomy than attempting to maintain individual parts through the main body. *This* is why structures utilize blood.

Fascinating.

…

Perhaps… this is why interferers would sever main parts of main body?

Hooowwwl!

This one's body immediately straightens, nose sniffing the air, ears swiveling to locate the source of the noise.

Strange. Different communication from the Observer and the Interferers. But this one understands it.

"*Prey is close. Pack, come hunt!"*

Hooowlll!

“Understood, will lead pack to prey!”

…

Satisfaction.

This one will also join the hunt.

But will hunt pack, as well as prey.

…

Body slinks low to the ground. Tentacles press against the main body, ready to erupt.

Is not cowardice! Merely assessing prey before this one attacks!

See what the… pack? Were communicating about.

Strange. Quadrupedal, but instead of their paws ending in claws, it ends in a strange hard structure. Eyes are located on either side of head, instead of the front. Structures grow out of the prey’s head, similar to branches of a tree, but different. It guards a number of

weaker prey, in a herd, which… eat the ground structures?

Very strange.

The pack-prey still hasn't noticed this one, instead all focused on the herd-prey. Keep an eye tentacle focused on them, in the event that they do.

See largest of the pack prey at the front, while the second largest lightly nips at its flank. Strange. Prey's structure is similar to the mutant hound, but slightly different.

"Yes, We notice it."

"Good. Divert all of pack to hunt the weak prey?"

"Majority of the pack. You and We will hunt the buck."

"But-"

"No but. Buck will sustain us for long time. Will let pups grow strong."

"… yes."

The pack-prey are moving!

Seven of them.

Strange. Seven of pack-prey, but only four of herd-prey?

…

Remember.

THIS PACK-PREY RELIES ON OTHERS! WILL MOST LIKELY ATTACK ONE HERD-PREY WITH MORE THAN ONE! COWARDICE!

But… learned from other prey.

If challenge prey now, will attempt to flee. Or fight.

This one is… not confident it can catch or kill all pack-prey before biomass is depleted.

So for now… observe.

Definitely is not cowardice!

Pack-prey are moving.

Lower main body to ground, follow at a distance.

Closer to the herd-prey, we approach.

Observe the herd-prey. One of them limps as it grazes, rests full weight on only three legs.

Weakness! Urge to move with pack-prey, corner and hunt!

…

Why does this anatomy have strange urges?

The pack-prey is only a little aways now. The largest herd-prey suddenly starts looking around. It's nose twitches.

Let's out warning sound to herd. Herd preys immediately FLEE!

PACK-PREY CHASES!

FOLLOW!

Five of the pack prey immediately corner the weakened prey, which is unable to flee quickly. The pack-prey first cripples the legs of the herd-prey. Then, when it can no longer flee, they all rip out it's throat.

Approval. Even if COWARDICE, is still good tactic. Applied it to earlier hound.

The two other pack-prey go after the largest prey. Similar tactics are used, but it is not as efficient. Herd-prey uses strange branch structures on head to ward them away.

Largest pack-prey attempts to bite leg, and herd-prey kicks it! Pack-prey whimpers, limps away. Possible broken bones? Weakness!

But while the herd-prey attacked the pack-prey, the second largest pack-prey attacked its other leg!

Crunch.

Ears can detect the noise from here, herd-prey's right foreleg is crushed, broken. Will most likely die soon, even if prey do not kill it.

Herd and pack prey look at each other warily, pack-prey circling around herd-prey, patient.

…

Odd.

Did the herd-prey's head branch structures always glow like that?

…

THEY DID NOT! They also *certainly* did *not* separate from its head and float around its main body like that!

The branch structures fragmented into 16 different points, and they float around its main body.

The floating branch structures begin swirling, faster, unti-

FAST!

Don't know how pack-prey managed to dodge them. This one couldn't even see what happened! But the pack prey leapt to the side, and now only 12 of the points remain.

Fascinating.

MUST HAVE STRUCTURE!

DEVELOP AND REFINE ARMOR!

CHARGE!

This one explodes from its vantage point, and all prey immediately turn to the main body.

Smug.

Yes, witness this one's superior form! WILL REND YOUR FLESH FROM YOUR BO-

PAAAAIIIIINNN!

Strange structures PIERCED THROUGH ARMOR!?

HOW!?

This one didn't even see them move! Structures pierced through armor, embedded in main body, almost pierced brain and core. But there are now only 9 points remaining, all facing towa-

DODGE!

Pain!

Only one structure pierced through armor.

Relief. Did not pierce anything vital.

But ANGRY!

Tentacles extend from the main body, waving in the air. The pack prey have backed away, eyeing main body warily. Herd-prey snorts, DODGE!

Satisfaction.

None managed to pierce through this time PIERCE!

Prey startled, attempts to sever tentacles with structures.

PAAAAIIINNN!

STRUCTURES PIERCE THROUGH MAIN BODY! PIERCE LUNGS, HEART, BRAI-

PAAAAIIIINNNNN!

WRAP TENTACLES AROUND HEAD!

RIIIP!

TEAR!

Prey stills.

Repair.

Devour.

Pack prey growl, attempt to move closer while this one eats.

Wave tentacles. Success, pack-prey look at each other and move away. Work with other pack-prey to drag weakened herd-prey away.

Do not chase. Must repair the main body while consumin- CORE!

…

Repairing all critical structures greatly consumes biomass and core energy.

Consume Core.

PAAAIN!

…

Tired…

So tired…

All of herd-prey is consumed…

New structure: Complete mutated Cervidae (Elk) anatomy (Cervidae organ system, skeleton system, mu…)

So. Tired.

Too… tired… to analyze… new… structures…

Drag… main body… to tree…

Climb… onto branch…

Stasis.

…

Chapter 11: Ravenous One

A note from Sonkoso

Heya, it's me again! Here's another interesting fact I found.

Did you know that the reason a lot of animals with plant based diets like cows, apes, deer, and others are so muscular is actually *because* they mostly only eat plants? Their stomachs utilize a specific bacteria that help them break down cellulose (the things that form the structures in plant cells that we humans can't digest, instead relying on simple starches like corn, wheat and potatoes), and these bacteria are actually super high in protein. And once this bacteria has helped them break down cellulose into glucose they can digest, their bodies naturally absorb both! Meaning they get their sugars and proteins at the same time from two different sources!

Chapter 11: Ravenous One

The Zeta-series project is a success!

When we observed lab one's X-series project through recorded video, we realized specifically what it was that we had been doing wrong.

We'd been using carbon based atomic designs for our projects. It is standard practice, in our defense. Despite over sixty years spent in Stillera, research into the carbon-like element stillon and its structures was extremely limited. In a research paper authored by Dr. Heravon, the idea that stillon was originally carbon that had been altered over millenia of exposure to Rift particles was at first dismissed outright. Nearly every other element, when exposed to Rift particles over an extended period of time, were either completely destroyed or unchanged. Early research into Rift particles likened it to alpha particle radiation, as it had no observable effect on intact cells.

However, it is now known that Rift particles, scientifically known as hera

radiation after Dr. Heravon, do in fact radically change carbon-based physiology with prolonged exposure. The Rift Horizon has been observed to alter DNA in all living organisms that cross it. Curiously, the Rift Horizon seemingly has no effect on non-organic substances. However, all attempts to artificially recreate this effect have been met with failure. Thus, carbon-based structures have been the basis for all subjects for nearly twenty years now.

It came as a surprise, then, when Dr. Rester proposed a test subject that utilized stillon as its atomic base. The Colonel and Dr. Grant were trepidatious about such a proposal. To do so meant to bring back still unconstructed Rift flesh over the Rift Horizon, an expedition that would mean casualties and massive losses of resources. However, Dr. Rester was a genius with a perfect record of successes, and as the head of lab one, a certain amount of prestige was afforded to...

… apologies, Dr. Grant.

… Yes, I'll fucking omit all previous statements not related to Zeta1 in the official report. Apologies for my language.

…

You're transferring me to lab one!? Fucking why!?

NO! I WILL NOT CALM DOWN DAMMIT! JUST BECAUSE I ACKNOWLEDGED THAT DR. RESTER IS A GENIUS DOES NOT MEA-

-End of recovered audio log from lab one research assistant, Junior Researcher Rose Clementine.

…

Awake! Out of stasis!

Climb down from tree.

AHHH!

Frustration.

This one forgot to remove the developed brain to ascertain whether or not maintained structures reverted back to the main body due to lack of biomass or lack of brain. Idiocy!

AND THE BIOMASS THIS ONE HAS SAVED IS ALMOST DEPLETED! Why!?

Was it combining Core? Is that why the biomass is almost gone!?

Hungry.

Will have to observe during the next stasis. But for now…

Analyze the new structures!

Mmm… mutated elk anatomy is very interesting. Is not meant for combat, but has combat capabilities. More so than coward porcupine

or weak songbird. Its antlers are used for intimidation tactics, and combat. The legs are superior designs for running, and don't consume as much biomass. But instead of having claws, has hooves.

Hmm… May be used to chase cowardly prey that attempts to escape, but for now hound legs will remain the favored movement structure.

It's digestive tract is… interesting. Instead of consuming prey, it relies on ground structures (grass? And fruits?) for biomass, and has a four chambered stomach. Superior design when compared to hound stomach. May incorporate later.

It also relies on microstructures to break down this grass into biomass. Superior, lots of grass when compared to available prey.

Confused.

Why don't all prey choose this method of gathering biomass?

…

Must test.

Develop Elk anatomy, modify altered digestive tract to retain biomass release function but resemble elk's, refine all.

Mmm… strange urges. Rub antlers against tree, sharpen and mark territory. Gather multiple female elk, breed and protect. Graze.

So. Hungry.

Eat the grass!

Eat eat eat eat eat.

Calculating gained biomass…

ONLY GAINED 6% OF BIOMASS REQUIRED TO MAINTAIN STRUCTURES!?

INEFFICIENT!

WOULD HAVE TO DEDICATE LARGE PORTIONS OF AWAKE CYCLES JUST TO MAINTAIN STRUCTURES!

Confused!

Why would *any* prey choose this method of gathering biomass!?

Disgusted. Waste of biomass and Core energy to develop anatomy. Change back to hound anatomy.

But thinking of Core energy…

Currently at 94%.

… strange. Feels like this one has more Core energy than before combining cores. Was this always the case?

And...

New Core ability: Minor osteokinesis (Active use consumes Core energy).

This must be what the elk-prey used to control its antlers and separate them from its main body.

Interesting. Still have not attempted to utilize other Core abilities, but must find a way to test them in the future.

List of available Core abilities: Analyzation and adoption, shapeshifting and major regeneration, psionic link and assault, minor telekinesis, invisibility, minor osteokinesis.

Rustle.

Twitch.

Ears swivel to locate source of noise.

Sniff.

STINKS! DON’T LIKE SMELL!

Growl.

Wave tentacles.

Rustle… SKREE!

… prey. **Hungry.**

But it **stinks!** Reluctant.

So hungry.

…

Hunger wins. Must search for the stinky prey.

Move. Forelegs move the main body forwards.

Howl!

“The Ravenous One is searching for the Den! FIGHT IT!”

The Ravenous One?

Hear pack-prey in the distance, where the stinky prey was making noise.

Must move faster! Before all the prey is gone!

RUN! RUN AS FAST AS POSSIBLE!

This one runs through the forest, trees speeding past as eye tentacles wave in the air. Develop canine auditory nervous system on tentacles! Refine! Must locate the prey!

SKREE!

“NO! MOON-CALLER! PACK, RETREAT!”

Finally burst out into open area. See… wtare? Have not encountered wtare since this one left its home. Know that most anatomies require wtare to survive.

Smug. Inferior designs.

Three pack-prey are lying on the ground, still. See more pack-prey fleeing. COWARDICE!

Eating one of the pack-prey is another, larger prey.

…

Prey is… odd?

Resembles the preys this one fought very early in its life cycle, but… larger. Still smaller than this one’s main body though.

Long claws, fur. Fur is all black on sides, but white from top of the head to thick tail.

Announce this one's presence as the prey eats.

Growl.

Prey stops eating, looking around to find the main body.

Prey stares at this one.

SKREE!

Not growl, sharper, more piercing.

Intimidation? Useless.

Growl.

Wave tentacles.

Prey is undeterred.

Recognize look in the prey's small eyes.

…

Hatred.

The prey hates this one. But why? Have not encountered prey before.

Prey charges! Very fast!

Pierce with tentacles!

Prey dodges to side, resumes charging.

YES! FINALLY! A NOT COWARD PREY!

The prey pounces towards the main body, claws scratch against refined armor. Smug, will not pierce. Stab with tentacles!

Pain!

Prey severs tentacles before they can pierce, resumes attacking the main body.

Roll, attempt to crush prey beneath main body.

Prey jumps off, lands, and charges again.

Stubborn. THIS ONE LIKES! SATISFACTION! FINALLY FOUND PREY, NO, COMPETITOR THAT UNDERSTANDS FIGHTING!

Swipe at competitor-prey with claws, dodges. Bite!

Competitor-prey snarls, scratching at head **pain** with claws and biting where armor is not. Prey rips away part of head.

Toss the competitor-prey to the side, repair and stab with more tentacles!

Pierced competitor! USE TEETH TO REND FLESH FROM BONES!

PAAIIINN!

Competitor severs more tentacles, but!

Riiip!

Tear away one of the prey's limbs. Prey charges again! Even more hatred from prey!

…

Strange, why is prey turning whi-

PAAAAAIIIIIINNNNN!

SAME PAIN AS POKING INSTRUMENTS AS *PAAAIINNN* PREY'S CLAWS SCRATCH AGAINST ARMOR! NO, PREY'S CLAWS *PAAINNN* RIP OFF PARTS OF ARMOR! HOW!?

STAB MORE! ***PAIINN!*** BUT CONTINUE STABBING! ***PAAAAIIINNN!***

PREY JUMPS AWAY, CHARGE AFTER IT! STAB WITH ALL TENTACLES, PREY DODGES BUT SWIPE WHERE PREY JUMPS! SUCCESS ***PAAAIIINN***BITE ***PAAAIIIINNN*** PIERCE WITH TENTACLES!

VIBRATE TENTACLES INSIDE OF COMPETITOR! DESTORY INTERNAL ORGANS, THEN *CONSTRICT* TENTACLES AROUND ITS SPINE! *CRUSH*!

Prey goes limp, the white fades.

SATISFACTION! GOOD FIGHT!

Happy.

Wiggle.

The poking instrument pain from tore off pieces of armor. Destroyed 50% of main body, most of internal organs, 20% of brain, no damage to core. But…

Worth.

Finally. A non-coward prey, that fought like this one fights! Liked the competitor, even if it stank!

Did not flee, even when almost killed!

Now…

Hungry.

Consume!

Eat eat eat core! Eat eat eat.

More rustling.

Another COMPETITOR!? EXCITED! Main body is heavily damaged, still repairing, but ready!

...

Oh… is just *coward* pack-prey.

Disappointed.

Disgust.

Store new Core inside of main body, to be combined later.

Growl.

The pack-prey immediately lowers itself to the ground, whimpering.

Disgust.

Cowardice. Disgrace to the competitor.

Move tentacles to pier-

"Wait!"

Blink.

…

Confused.

Did the pack-prey just communicate? But no vibrations or sounds.

Wait. This is similar to...

"Yes! We have formed the psionic link. You can communicate with We. You have killed the Ravenous One, and We have sensed you have a Core! We wish to bring you, the Great One, to the pack!"

…

What?

Chapter 12: A New Predator

A note from Sonkoso

Heya, another interesting thing I discovered!

In 1973, a study was conducted with wolf urine. The point of the study was to determine what pheremones exactly wolf urine had inside of it.

Strangely, animals had an extreme adverse reaction to places marked with this urine, oftentimes outright refusing to enter areas that had this scent. Even animals that normally would never have contact with wolves!

Strangely enough, urine isn't the only things wolves can produce these phermones with. Some produce it in their paws, forelegs, and even their backs!

No.

This one begins moving, consume the pack-prey on the ground.

“What!? But Great One, We must insi-”

No. Don’t want to.

Eat. Eat eat **consume.**

“But why!? The Great One saved the den, the pups, from the Ravenous

One. You even resemble the pack. You belong with us-"

No!

Turn to face pack-prey.

Growl.

Pack-prey lowers to ground again, submission.

Disgust.

If this one were to join the pack…. **unpleasant.** It would be cowardice. Relies on others to hunt prey. Is not how one should hunt, fight. Is cowardice. And, structures are inferior.

Sniff.

Smug.

Pack has nothing to offer this one. No Cores, no interesting structures. So, no.

Turn back to dead pack-prey. Resume eating.

"*But Great One, you could mate with We-"*

ANNOYED!

This one said no!

Wave tentacles. PIERCE COWARD PAC-

"CORE! We can teach the Great One how to use its Core! We know that the Great One is still unsure how to utilize it fully!"

…

Reluctant. But… interested.

ANNOYED! But pack-prey raises good argument!

Admission, this one still does not know how to form psionic link. Despite having Core ability for at least three awake and stasis cycles.

This one attempted to utilize the psionic blast against the competitor,

but was unsuccessful. Learning how to utilize Core abilities would be… beneficial.

But!

Reluctant. Do not like coward pack-prey.

“And… biomass? That is what the Great One calls prey? Pack and We can provide… biomass.”

Reluctant!

But… is good offer.

Growl.

Fine!

“SUCCESS!!”

But! This one will demands you to not be coward! Which means no more groveling or submission. Do you understand?

“We understand. Now, the Great One must-”

Growl.

“… please, follow We to the pack. Sun-Walker and Star-Reader will be most interested in studying the Great One.”

… Don’t like the terms used. Similar to how interferers would refer to this one.

But if they can teach this one how to utilize Core effectively… fine. This one can tolerate it.

This one follows the Observer-like pack-prey. But make sure to **consume** dead pack prey before doing so.

Pack-prey seems a little distraught upon witnessing this one do so. Why? It is wasteful if all biomass is not consumed.

“… We understand. But still, We were friends with the pack members the Great One is eating.”

Friends? What is that? Superior designs? Or **coward** reliance?

“… Never mind… the Great One’s thinking is beyond Our

comprehension."

Smug. Knew this already, superior design.

...

Walk for long time. While walking, repair damage and analyze new structures.

New anatomy: Complete mutated mustelidae (Honey Badger) anatomy (Complete honey badger skeleton, organ system, pherem…), Complete canine (Wolf) anatomy (Complete wolf skeleton system, orga…).

New Core ability: Minor electrokinesis, electroreception (Active use consumes Core energy).

Core energy is at 53%.

"So the Great One can use new Core abilities and prey bodies? Star-Reader will be very interested in this!"

The psionic link is still active!?

"Apologies. Once the psionic link is formed, We maintain it passively. It

consumes less of Our Core energy than building new links."

…

It is efficient… but annoyed. Does this mean pack-prey (wolf) are always listening to thoughts?

"…"

No confirmation from wolf. But know in Core that they are!

Sniff.

Hmm…

There has been a strange scent for a while now. Marks territory, repulses other prey. Strange.

Pass by tree.

Sniff.

The same scent. Smells similar to the scent from the wolf this one is

traveling with.

“Yip!”

“Yip yip, growl, yip!”

Ears swivel to detect other wolf noises. Odd, these sounds are higher pitched than usual.

BARK!

The wolf this one is traveling with makes a noise.

“PUPS!”

Wolf CHARGES! IS IT NOT PACK-PREY BUT OTHER PREY THAT THIS ONE IS HEARING!? CHARGE WITH THEM!

…

Smaller versions of wolves are rolling on ground, displaying aggressive behaviors. Fighting? But not killing. Strange.

Fighting outside of very big tree, hole in the middle of it. BIG TREE!

“PUPS! TAKE THIS!”

“AH! MIND-WALKER HAS ARRIVED! RUN!”

“YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE WE!”

Confused.

Smaller version of wolves attempt to flee as the wolf this one had been traveling with pounces on them. But again, aggressive without killing. Very strange.

It is not a contest. The wolf this one was traveling simply rolls onto smaller-wolves, crushing them beneath its main body.

“MIND-WALKER! TOO HEAVY! YOU HAVE NOT BEEN PUP FOR A MOON NOW! GET OFF US!”

Mind-Walker does not seem to care, simply lays on the pups with their tongue hanging out, licking them.

Confused.

Cannot comprehend. Aggressiveness without battle.

Growl.

Vibrations in air, deep. Mind-Walker immediately gets off of pups, submissive. COWARDICE!

More vibrations in air, hear paws pad against earth.

… Threat. Know it in Core. Source of vibrations is dangerous.

Wave tentacles, prepare for fiGH**T!?**

BIG!

SO! BIG!

New wolf - TWICE AS BIG AS THIS ONE'S MAIN BODY - exits from the tree hole, growling, studying pups and Mind-Walker.

Shake.

Familiar feeling from the big wolf. It is **predator.**

Mind-Walker sits up, but their head is still lowered. Communicates.

“We greet the Time-Breaker.”

Big wolf ignores Mind-Walker, inspects this one’s main body.

Shake.

You want to fight!?

Wave tentacles, grow big. Intimidation! BIG WOLF IS NOT AS **FEAR** INDUCING AS THE OTHER **PREDATOR!**

Wolf… *snorts*!?

IS BIG WOLF-PREY LOOKING DOWN ON THIS ONE’S SUPERIOR - reluctant, maybe not superior - DESIGN?

“*Who are you?”*

Growl.

THIS ONE WILL SHOW YOU WH-

…

Strange. Can sense that Mind-Walker is communicating with the big wolf.

Big wolf looks from this one, back to Mind-Walker.

Snort.

Know that the big wolf is insulting this one's superior design.

THAT'S IT!

CHARGE!

Mind-Walker stands up, *shaking.*

"NO, STOP GREAT ONE!"

STAAAAB!

PAAAAIIIINNN!

PAIN IS BENEATH SKIN! BUT DOES NOT MATTER, STAAAAB!

Tentacles pierce big wolf. VIBRATE TENTA-

…

Confusion.

Wasn't this one just running towards the big prey? Why is this one back where it started? And tentacles are no longer piercing the big wolf?

And… why is Mind-Walker sitting again?

DOES NOT MATTER! CHAAARGE!

Mind-Walker stands up once more.

"NO, STOP GREAT ON-"

…

What?

Back to starting point again? And Mind-Walker is sitting again?

…

Cautious. Big wolf is strange.

Big wolf inspects this one. *Snorts.*

Hatred.

CHAARGE!

“NO, STOP GRE-”

…

AGAIN?

WHAT IS GOING ON!? WHY DOES THIS ONE KEEP MOVING BACK TO THE STARTING POINT?

Wave tentacles.

FRUSTRATED!

"*... Mind-Walker, who have you brought to Us? Its mind is not reset with Our Core ability. Only its body.*"

More communication between Mind-Walker and the big wolf.

Reluctant to charge again. May be futile. For now, only observe.

…

Pups come up to this one's main body.

Strange urge. Protect pups, develop them into hunters for the pack.

They sniff this one's main body. Then, the smallest of them communicate.

“You smell strange.”

Unpleasant. This one smells perfectly fine.

Growl.

*“You **look** strange. Weak. Useless.”*

The pup bristles, *growling.*

Growl back.

Pups *yelp*, back away, hide behind the big wolf.

Smug. Cowardice. Won the non-battle.

Wiggle.

“You killed the Ravenous One?”

The big wolf communicates. Still. Big wolf appears doubtful.

“*This one killed all that challenged it. You will be no different.*”

CHAAAARG-

…

FRU! STRA! TED! BACK TO STARTING POINT!

Big wolf is inspecting the main body. Yes, observe this one’s **superior** form. Does not rely on weird Core ability that puts it back at a starting point.

“This one killed the honey badger, what you call the Ravenous One.”

…

After observing this one’s main body for a longer period of time, it nods. Turns away, begins walking back to hole in the tree.

“Follow. Star-Reader will want to speak with you.”

Annoyed. But for some reason cannot harm the big wolf. So this one follows.

Chapter 13: Meeting The Leaders

The inside of the tree is big. Open space, where more wolves lay, either sleeping or grooming each other. There are not a lot of them, only five more. The three pups follow us as we walk, before running to another wolf and hopping on to them.

"Mind-Walker brought strange new member to pack mother! The strange one is mean!"

… Are they talking about this one?

Growl.

"Do not mind them, Great One." Mind-Walker communicates with the psionic link, making no noise. But this one can still sense… amusement? *"They will come to accept you. As it has always been with the pack."*

Sniff.

Do not care.

As we walk, all of the wolves bow their head to the big wolf. They also recognizes that among them, it is still predator.

The big wolf does not greet them, only leads this one and Mind-Walker past the wolves. The ground slopes up, higher into the inside of the tree, winding around until it leads into the roof. The big wolf continues to walk forwards, until we reach the roof into a smaller, but still big open space.

…

There are two more wolves here. One is BIG! Even bigger than the big wolf, though only slightly. It is sitting up, watching us all enter without anxiousness. Also seems dangerous, will have to finish preparing and consuming biomass before this one is ready to fight.

The other is small. Much smaller than the main body, even more than Mind-Walker. It is laying down, head resting on its paws, eyes closed. It only opens one eye when we enter.

But this one can feel it. The **fear** it causes inside of the main body.

Predator.

The big wolf bows its head to the **predator**, communicates.

"We have brought the one that Mind-Walker has led to Us, Star-Reader."

The **predator** only yawns and scratches at its ear. The bigger wolf looks at the **predator** and *snorts*, before also bowing its head.

“Thank you, Time-Breaker. Take the pack out to hunt, and mark the territory once more. We are in need of more prey, and the rival pack has been encroaching upon Our land more and more.”

The big wolf bows its head once more and turns around, walking back down the slope. Mind-Walker begins to follow them, before a *deep* growl rumbles from the **predator.**

Shake.

Is cowardice, the shake. But is natural.

Still…

FRUSTRATED! HOW MANY PREDATORS IS THIS ONE GOING TO ENCOUNTER!?

“Mind-Walker, you stay with Us and the new one.” The **predator** communicates.

Mind-Walker stops, also *shakes,* but comes back to sit next to this one.

When the big wolf - Time-Breaker - exits, the **predator** yawns again, and stands up. Both eyes open, it inspects the main body.

Strange. Feel pressure on brain, but it is negligible. But Mind-Walker is beginning to sink to the floor, submissive.

Smug. Superior to Mind-Walker, even if… GAH! FINE! Even if inferior to yet *another* wolf.

Don't know how long the **predator** inspects this one, as it stares at the main body.

Wave tentacles. Stare back.

Bite!

…

Confused.

The bigger wolf bites the ***predator***!?

"How long will you keep trying to force the new one down before you realize they are immune? Stop it."

The **predator's** hackles raise as it growls at the bigger wolf.

Are they going to fight?

The bigger wolf *growls* back.

They're going to fight!

YES! THIS ONE IS FULLY REPAIRED, READY TO FIGHT THE **PREDATOR!**

"Fine." The **preda-**

…

Odd. All feelings of danger and fear from the smaller wolf are gone. It now simply seems like a regular wolf.

…

The… predator - Star-Reader - sits back down, and again rests its head on its paws. Mind-Walker sighs, can hear their relief as they rise from the floor.

The bigger wolf's ears twitch, and it communicates.

"Mind-Walker, it seems you've brought a new member to Our pack. Why?"

Mind-Walker's tail wags as they pant. No more verbal communication, but know they are communicating through the psionic link.

While they do, Star-Reader sniffs the air.

"You smell… oddly familiar, new one. Like encroachers, and like… Mmm, hard to say in this speech… Ḧo̱m̰e̱; Have not had this scent since We were a pup." They say, head still resting on their paws.

Still.

Ḧo̱m̰e̱? Where has this one heard that before?

…

Remember!

The first predator!

The first predator mentioned H̓o̓m̓e̓.

“This one only smells as a superior form should.”

Smug.

Star-Reader blinks, slowly. Lips draw back, revealing teeth. Aggression?

No. Amusement.

“Superior, you say. Ha! We remember thinking like you did, when We were just a pup. Yes, We suppose that those with a Core will always be superior to those without.”

…

Confused. Do not all structures have a Core?

“A Core? The new one has a Core?”

The bigger wolf communicates this to Star-Reader, who snorts.

“Ah, that’s right Sun-Walker, We had forgotten you could not sense them. All muscle and no thoughts, idio-”

Bite.

More growling. But no attempts to harm.

Confused! Are the wolves going to fight or not!?

Sun-Walker huffs, then looks at this one.

“Mind-Walker,” Sun-Walker glares at the wolf, who lowers their head, *“failed to mention that you had a Core. We are curious. How? Did your sires have Cores, or were you blessed by Ḩơ̷̧̗̭̰̳̹̖̳̹̖̳̹̖

They exhibit… excitement?

Sense more psionic link communication, but now between Sun-Walker and Star-Reader.

Want to try, test with Mind-Walker, but...

FRUSTRATION! WHY CAN'T THIS ONE DO IT?

Anatomies and structures are used with **instinct**, so why aren't Core abilities!?

Gah!

Star-Reader stands, looks at this one again.

"New one, demonstrate your Core ability for Us."

… but this one already is?

"This structure is the Core ability."

Now the wolves look confused.

“What?”

Remove all structures except for brain and altered digestive tract., return to the base main body.

…

Don’t like that this one is now smaller than Star-Reader. Push tentacles underneath the main body, enlarge.

Happy, now bigger again.

Wiggle.

All wolves are looking at the main body. Yes! Main body is indeed still superior, even in base form. Observe it! Bask in this one’s superiority!

Mind-Walker makes amused sound.

“So the new one is not originally the same as Our pack. Interesting.” Star-Reader communicates, sitting back down.

Obviously. Wolves do not even have tentacles. Inferior.

Develop all previous structures, once again bigger. Satisfaction.

Core energy is currently 37%. Tired, will require stasis soon.

Sun-Walker looks slightly distressed, but still seems pleased. *"It will be good to have another with a natural Core among the pack, even if they are not naturally one of us. Maybe We can finally kill the Supreme One."*

"We told you! The Great One shall make the pack much stronger! They even killed the Ravenous One!"

… annoyed.

"This one did not say it would join your pack."

"…"

"…"

"But Great One…"

*“No! And you have not given this one biomass, **or** taught how to use other Core abilities like you promised! Not doing what you said is cowardice!”*

Sun-Walker and Star-Reader still.

… they wouldn’t fight the main body just because this one didn’t say it was going to join the pack, right?

Right?

Sun-Walker communicates. Must prepare to fight, if it comes to it!

*“What do you mean, **other** Core abilities?”*

Hmm?

Not fighting?

“This one has nine Core abilities, including the original.”

“WHAT?”

Chapter 14: Compromised

“And do you recall where you were between the time of 21:46 to 23:33?” The inquisitor asked for, to what Doctor Rester felt, had been nearly the hundredth time now. He scrubbed his face in his hands, frustration building inside of him.

“For what I hope will be the last time,” He said, exhausted and with a hint of barely restrained anger, “I was in my office, talking with my daughter. And after that, I was with Senior Researcher Devon Grandhall, before everything went to hell.”

The inquisitor nodded knowingly, writing in her notepad, only adding to Doctor Rester’s burgeoning annoyance. The inquisitor, a human woman with short, brown hair, sharp features, and a decidedly athletic build complete with a formal suit, looked up to study Doctor Rester. He recognized the look in her eyes, the faint pink glow around her irises that indicated she was utilizing some form of psionic Core ability to determine if what he was saying was truly what he believed to be the truth, before she resumed writing in her little book.

The Doctor sighed. He had been awake for nearly 23 hours now, answering question after question with seemingly no end to them after the incident three days prior. After awakening to being detained in a small room for nearly two days, and then being moved to another, smaller interrogation room grated on his nerves. Even if *intellectually* he understood the necessity, his patience was wearing thin.

“Look, Ms…” He ventured for a few moments.

Seeing the inquisitor’s impassive expression, he continued. “I’ve been completely isolated from all forms of contact between my team, and my family, for almost *53 hours*.” The inquisitor wrote something else in her notes, and the Doctor barely stopped himself from grating his teeth. “I understand the necessity, but surely you could-”

“Doctor,” She interrupted him abruptly, “I’m under strict orders to ensure that does *not* happen. I’m sorry.”

The Doctor let out a small grunt, pressing his fingers against his eyes in an attempt to rub some moisture back into them. Finally, he lowered his hands to rest them back against the small metal table he was sitting at, deliberately making his actions as non-threatening as possible.

Deciding that reason was out of the question, he instead drew upon everything in his power to extract sympathy.

“My apologies, inquisitor. I’m old, and these bones of mine don’t do well when sitting for so long.” He flashed a smile, and felt a moment of triumph when her eyes softened ever so slightly. “I’ve worked for Androtech for over forty years now. I met my wife while working here, as I’m sure your file,” he gestured to the thick stack of papers to her right, “has informed you. All I want to know is if my team is alright. Surely you could comfort an old man with that knowledge.”

The inquisitor leaned back, pursing her lips and tapping her pen against the table in a slow, rhythmic pattern. But the Doctor knew he had garnered at least some rapport with his cooperation over the past day, and waited patiently. Very carefully making sure to assume what he hoped was as non-threatening a posture as he could manage. He hadn’t been lying; his head was pounding from the hours of interrogation and harsh white light of the room, and his back was sore from sitting in his only lightly cushioned chair.

Finally, she spoke.

“If by your team, Doctor, you mean researchers Devon Grandhall, Rose Clementine, Carl Humes, Hunt Standesh, and the miscellaneous personnel assigned to lab tech and security detail… yes. They’re all alive, and have also been detained for further questioning regarding their activities during the security incident. Though… there were some casualties among the lab techs and security detail.”

The Doctor breathed a sigh of relief, his posture relaxing. The inquisitor’s gaze softened further, another victory in the Doctor’s eyes.

“Could I see their interrogation reports?” He inquired, his head bowing even as he leaned forward, but he made sure to keep an eye

on the inquisitor. She pursed her lips again, before her head tilted to the side, a behavior the Doctor had observed to happen whenever she engaged in psionic communication.

With a terse nod, her eyes once again focused on the Doctor, and she removed the circlet from around her neck, placing it on the table between them both.

“Very well. These are the videos from their own interrogation rooms.” She tapped on the circlet, and a holographic screen flashed into the Doctor’s view. He recognized the person in question, resting her hands primly in her lip, her fiery red hair in a tight bun and her posture straight as an arrow as she stared at the male inquisitor across from her.

“Hello, Mrs. Clementine.” The male inquisitor said, interlocking his fingers on the table in front of him as he settled into a much more relaxed posture, a smile on his face.

“Ms.” She corrected, readjusting in her seat.

“I’m sorry?”

“*Ms.* Clementine. I’ve been divorced for a fucking month now, not that you idiots would care to update your files anyways.” She snapped, and the Doctor winced as he noticed the inquisitor’s smile freeze on his face. “No apologies for my language.”

“...right. Sorry, Ms. Clementine. Would you mind stating your name and title to the camera?”

Rose’s gaze immediately locked onto the camera located in the room, green eyes intense as they seemed to pierce straight through the screen into whoever was observing them.

“I am Rose Clementine, Junior Research assistant to Doctor Alexander Rester, head of lab one.”

Rose’s gaze immediately switched back to stare down the inquisitor, though he showed no obvious reaction to the sudden shift in focus. He picked up his pen and opened his notebook, and with a *click* seemed to prepare himself for the long interrogation ahead. “Alright

Ms. Clementine. I'll remind you that you may remain silent to any of the following questions, as anything you say can and will be held against-"

"Please hurry the fuck up with whatever questions you're going to ask me. No apologies… fuck it, I'm not going to bother. I'm already sick of being here."

The Doctor winced again as he noticed both the inquisitor in the video and the one across from him raise an eyebrow in unison. It would have been humorous, if the Doctor didn't know she was actively sabotaging any chance of her establishing rapport with her own inquisitor

"Oookay." Another wince. The Doctor was practically cringing in on himself by now. An inquisitor breaking polite conduct? That was never good. "Ms. Clementine, how would you describe your time working with Androtech?"

"God damn fantastic. Every day is *another* learning opportunity." The unconcealed sarcasm in her voice grated on even the Doctor's nerves.

Maybe I should have transferred her to lab two after all?

"Great. And has anything transpired recently that might have caused… complications, in your feelings towards Androtech? Anything that might have caused some friction?"

At this Rose finally seemed to observe the inquisitor's change in disposition, from being formally polite to passively confrontational.

"None whatsoever. I'd say that I've taken the rather abrupt transfer from lab three to lab one in stride. Doctor Rester is far more reasonable to work with than Doctor Grant."

The inquisitor takes notes, even as Doctor Rester cringes further.

Stop talking, Rose. He pleaded silently, though he knew it was pre-recorded. *You're only making it worse.*

"I think that's enough on Ms. Clementine." The inquisitor across from him said, and he nodded. "Now, we'll switch to Mr. Humes."

The Doctor nodded thankfully as she tapped her circlet, and the feed switched to a thick caucasian man with tanned skin and long, dark brown hair. He was sitting across from another male inquisitor, a bald nuan man that was remarkably smaller in stature. They appeared to be mid-conversation, where they picked up in the recording having skipped the introductory protocols.

“-leasant enough bloke, Doctor Rester. Even if he gets a little, uh, cuckoo in the head sometimes.” Carl said, twirling his finger around around his temple.

The inquisitor across from him massaged his own temples, a rare sign of unprofessionalism.

“Uh-huh. Now if we could just get back t-”

“OH! Yeah, sorry, wandered completely off track there. X1! I haven’t even shown you how he looks when like when he’s eating something. Terrifying, but in the most adorable way possible, if you know what I mean. You mind if I borrow your pen and paper? Thanks mate. Now, give me just a second…”

The Doctor felt a flashed mix of both pride and annoyance at Carl’s flippancy. But whatever he was doing, it had put the inquisitor off-kilter, which was a win in his mind.

“There you go. Cute little bugger, isn’t he?”

The inquisitor looked objectively horrified at whatever Carl was showing him, though the camera wasn’t able to capture it. He coughed, grabbing the notebook and pen back from Carl and hurriedly flipping the page over.

“Right. Cute. Now, Mr. Humes, back to my previous question. Why did you open X1’s cage, effectively allowing it to escape?”

At this the Doctor looked up at the inquisitor across from him, a mix of confusion and horror plain across his face. Seemingly not to notice it, the inquisitor tapped her circlet again.

“Mr. Standesh’s video now.”

“Wait, inquisitor, what did he mean by-”

“We’ll get to that question later, Doctor. You wanted to ensure all of your team were alright. So, Mr. Standesh.”

The Doctor bit back his next words, though he could already feel the dread sinking inside of him, settling into his gut.

“Category 6.” The evacuation message had said.

Again, the prerecorded video seemed to cut in on them mid-conversation, a hispanic male with long, unkempt and wild hair, and an asian female inquisitor sitting across from him. Mr. Standesh was rocking back and forth in his chair, hands clutched on his head as the female inquisitor looked at him, faked concern plastered across her face.

“-ck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. I knew we should have purged X1. I fucking knew it!”

“Relax, Mr. Standesh. I only asked if you knew what the official class and category X1 was labeled as.”

Mr. Standesh looked at her, his eyes wild while his voice peaked through the audio.

“I FUCKING KNEW IT! THAT FUCKING MONSTER IS THE CAUSE OF ALL OF THIS, ISN’T IT? WAIT, IS BRANSON OKAY? BRASON’S OKAY, RIGHT!? HE WAS RIGHT NEXT TO ME WHEN THE SHIT WENT DOWN! SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT SHI-”

Doctor Rester sighed as the inquisitor muted the audio. He had known of Mr. Standesh’s fear of X1, of course, but he had never thought it had been this bad. It bordered on a phobia, and he watched with mild concern as Mr. Standesh seemed to fall unconscious at the interrogation table, the inquisitor in the video tilting her head in another form of psionic communication.

The inquisitor across from the Doctor cleared her throat, snapping his attention back to her.

“Unfortunately, I’m not permitted to show you Mr. Grandhall’s

interrogation video, much as the members of your team won't be allowed to view yours. Both of you have been selected for… special questioning."

Class 7, category 6 the voice echoed in his memory once again.

"… Inquisitor." Doctor Rester eventually said, his voice very quiet. "Has it been determined what categories were included in the class 7's category 6?"

The inquisitor inspected him, before tilting her head slightly. A nod, and she tapped her circlet once more.

This time, however, instead of showing another interrogation room, it showed a metal hallway, and in this hallway was a metal door. A door that looked all too familiar to Doctor Rester.

"This was taken from security footage inside of lab one." She said, oh so quietly. But the Doctor already knew that.

The door opened, and two figures emerged from it. A moderately handsome nuan, and an old man. The old man and the nuan… held thermoses in their hands. Immediately five figures armed with weapons, M5C3s, enter the frame and flank them. They begin to fire at something off screen, but freeze, and lower their weapons as their arms go slack. The two figures attempt to shake them out of their torpor, to no avail.

The video distorts as a shadowy figure emerges into the frame, bipedal with 4 tentacles. The two figures that emerged from the door grow still, as the shadowy figure seemingly communicates with them. They nod, and the shadow figure exits the frame, the feed finally returning to normal. They each take a pistol holstered by two of the security detail… and execute them. One by one.

Class 7, Category 6.

By now, the dread inside of the Doctor has transformed into a sinking realization, a horror he couldn't escape from.

The inquisitor stands up, moving around the table to gently place her hands onto his shoulders.

“Doctor, under the Surreveil act, anyone under the effects of psionic control are not held accountable for their actions. But they are still to be detained, and stopped from all communication with any permanent party or civilian that has not been vetted and given clearance, in the event that they are compromised.”

The Doctor’s mouth trembles as the security feed changes, showing the two figures walking down a hall. Gunning down any who stand in their way.

An old man, and a moderately handsome nuan.

“Doctor… what are the categories assigned to a Rift, Mutated, or Gifted entity?”

The Doctor’s voice trembles, as he recites what he had been taught when first entering the Rift on Earth, to cross over to Stillera.

“Category one.” He says, very quietly. “Shapeshifter. The ability to change their bodily structures or amplify their physical form.”

The inquisitor rubs his shoulder comfortingly, as the video continues to play. It shifts, showing the shadowed entity meeting certain figures in lab one.

A stern looking woman with fiery red hair, who after meeting the entity turned around and strangled a lab tech.

“Category three, kinetic.The ability to influence the matter around them in various ways. Category four, reality bender. The ability to create or destroy matter at will, and has also been observed to open Rifts.”

A thick caucasian man with long, brown hair, who after meeting the entity walks to the observing room for X1’s testing grounds and opens its cage.

Class 7, Category 6.

“Category five, leader. Others that share a species with it will exhibit extreme behaviors of obedience, following its orders to the best of its abilities. Category seven, space and time bender. All attempts to

observe these effects have been met with failure."

A hispanic man with long, wild and unkempt hair, who after meeting the entity turns on his best friend, a fellow security detail member who was the first to make fun of him due to his fear of X1, and cracks his skull against the ground.

Category 6.

"Category two, psionic. The ability to use one's own mind to affect the world around them and influence another's, to varying degrees of effect."

The feed switches back to the old man and the handsome nuan. Around them is a pile of bodies, guns and shocking batons laying on the ground next to them. The two figures push their pistols against each other's temples… and pull the trigger.

But nothing happens.

They've run out of ammo.

Category…

"And category six. When an entity has more than one ability, up to three."

The two figures collapse. But their work has been done.

The video speeds up, until multiple figures in armor find these unconscious, but alive, lab one members, and carry them out of the building.

A choking sob escapes from the Doctor.

The inquisitor rests her hands on his shoulders.

"Again, under the Surreveil act, anyone under the effects of a psionic are acquitted from any actions they commit. But…"

The old man's and the handsome nuan's figures are among them.

His… and Devon's.

"But I must ask again. Do you recall where you were between the time of 21:46 to 23:33?"

Chapter 15: Core Abilities

"Again." Time-Breaker barks.

Annoyed!

Three cycles. Three awake cycles *wasted* attempting to learn the other core abilities.

Three cycles, and incalculable amounts of biomass.

Wave tentacles. *Growl.*

"Again!" Time-Breaker repeats, undeterred and this one forces the main body to stand.

Core energy is currently 46%.

Reach into your Core. Rely on the same feelings you have to change your shape, or regrow your lost limbs.

This communication is from Mind-Walker, adding to an incalculable amount of repetitions.

Growl.

Mind-Walker bows her head (learned that Mind-Walker was female, in her multiple attempts to mate with this one), slinking away.

Just because Star-Reader said they could teach this one how to use its Core abilities… But Star-Reader can't be coward and not fulfill its promise. Is predator. So.

Grow teeth along main body.

Attempt to separate teeth from the main body with osteomancy. Seems to be the most useful Core ability.

Immediately the teeth begin to deteriorate, dropping to the ground.

"*Again!"*

FRUSTRATED!

Hear yipping from the pups, pleased noises from them.

"See? Told you Shape-Changer can't do it."

Know in Core the smallest of them communicated that.

More yipping and barking. Amusement from them.

Snarl.

The pups run back to their female sire, their mother, and hide behind her.

“Great One, perhaps a hunt would help you to clear your mind?”

Hunt?

Prey!

Look hopefully towards Time-Breaker, and the predator nods. Reluctant?

Smug. This one will still hunt. You cannot stop it.

“But Shape-Changer is not allowed to use their tentacles or body against any prey that they encounter, until they can use their kinesis or psionic abilities.”

Hatred.

Hate Time-Breaker, and Star-Reader who said that the wolf must take charge of this one! HATE THEM!

Hesitation from the Mind-Walker, but they nod their head. Hah! This one did not agree to this!

“Shape-Changer, you must also consent.”

THEY SAW THROUGH THIS ONE’S DECEPTION? HOW?

Fine!

…

This one agrees.

Time-Breaker rumbles their consent.

Mind-Walker stands, flicks their tail in an indication for this one to follow, and leaves the den.

Reluctant.

But hunt?

This one moves, wave tentacles for eyes to pick up light as this one joins Mind-Walker.

It is very strange. The bright, warm light leaves at the end of this one's awake cycle, and is replaced by two, much less bright lights. Eyes are not as functional during this time, night as the pack calls it. Instead, hearing and scenting become much more important.

Annoyed. This one only joined the pack because Star-Reader and Sun-Walker confirmed they could teach this one how to use it's other Core abilities. But so far, all that has happened is hunting, looking after the pups while the pack hunts, being told that the way this one attempts to learn is incorrect, and stasises.

Well… the rest of our pack has only been able to unlock their Core abilities through annoyance or danger. And the leaders are not willing to risk losing the Great One. So annoyance it is.

Annoyed that Mind-Walker is constantly listening to this one's thoughts.

If you don't like it, then use your own psionic abilities to stop it. She

communicates. Is that… smugness!?

Ah! Stop, sniff here. Mind-Walker scratches at the ground, her hackles raising, moving leafs and sniffing, then letting this one sniff.

Hmm…

Prey? But the usual prey does not mark its territory like this. And the scent is heavier… like a predators. Stale, but still here.

"The Supreme One is getting closer to the den." She growls, ears swiveling and nose twitching.

Sniff the air.

Still.

Scent in air is similar to wolf pack, but different. And it's fresh.

"Rivals!" Mind-Walker growls, her main body lowering to the floor. This one also lowers to the ground, slinking forwards.

Is not cowardice! Just allows this one to observe prey before it is discovered!

Develop auditory nervous system on tentacles, refine, wave to detect vibrations and noises in air.

“Growl.”

“Don’t give up! Kill the Supreme One!”

“Do you hear that?” This one growls, looking to Mind-Walker. She shakes her head.

Smug. Once again, vindication of this one’s superior design. Able to hear the fighting, while she cannot.

Run! To the fight!

Wait Great One, Time-Breaker said not to fight until you-

TIME-BREAKER DOES NOT KNOW WHAT IS BEST FOR THIS ONE! Trees blur past this one’s main body, as it shoots forward. Mind-Walker cannot keep up with this one.

YES! This is what this one was made for! Hunting prey!

Tentacles stab into the ground, pushing this one along even faster, paws barely touching the leaves as the main body is moved forward at a speed the developed brain is barely able to process.

Sniff.

Different scents enter this one's nose. Leaves, heavy with the smell of other, smaller prey, and wtar-water. Rain, this one remembers it being called by the pack. Rain must have fallen, while this one was not paying attention. Various small prey, and…

Other pack prey. And the predator. Much closer, fresh scent.

Great one! Wait for Us!

No! Wrap tentacles around tree, sling the main body up at an angle. Fly! Fly fly fly!

NO FAIR!

Is not this one's fault you have inferior design! Develop wings then!

See them now. Rival pack-wolves fighting against a BIG prey. Must be the predator!

It is big. Has fur, claw, and sharp teeth structures. But is almost three times this one's size.

Shake. But must not show cowardice.

The rival-wolves circle around the big predator. Recognize the strategy, was used against this one. Whenever one attacks, the others attack from different sides.

Growl. Cowardice!

But must not charge yet. Sit on branch of a tree, wait, ready for when one prey group or the other is weak.

One of the wolves attacks, biting at the hindleg of the big predator. It immediately turns around, swiping at the wolf.

Yelp-crunch.

…

Surprised.

Just one swipe, and it knocks the wolf-prey against a tree. It collapses, still. Is dead!?

Even with this one's growth, would not be able to do that.

The other wolf-preys show signs of distress. Back away, more cautious now.

Hackles raise. This one's turn to fight?

"Great One, where did you… THE SUPREME ONE!?"

Mind-Walker bursts into the clearing, calling for this one, but the other preys notice her before this one can call out.

They all turn to her. The wolf-prey look between her and the predator, and their dead pack member… and flee!?

COWARDS! Do not run from fight!

The predator has scratches on its side, but it does not seem to matter bother it. Recognize the look in its eyes.

Hunger.

"MIND-WALKER, YOU MUST RETREA-"

FAST!

Predator moves faster than this one can finish communicating, bounding towards Mind-Walker. She has slower, inferior design. Won't be able to move away in time.

NO! MIND-WALKER IS THIS ONE'S FUTURE PREY! YOU CANNOT HAVE!

Wave tentacles, develop respiratory tract on tentacles.

Roar!

The sound echoes out throughout the clearing. The predator pauses, looks for this one.

GOOD! DISTRACTED!

Leap!

Land on the predator's back. But can't use tentacles! Said this one wouldn't!

FRUSTRATED!

Would be cowardice to not do what this one says it would!

Bite, claw, tear into the predator's back.

Annoyed. Even though there is no armor, the predator's back is hard to pierce. Rubbery fat prevents this one's attacks from piercing.

The predator *roars* back as this one attacks it, turning and crashing into trees. Hold on! Sink claws into back, will not be shaken off!

Prey rolls. Know this move!

Jump off, land a little bit away from prey.

Stare at each other, circling. Prey studies this one. Wave eye tentacles, stare back.

Still surprised at how BIG it is. Almost comes up to half of the tree.

Predator bites at the air in front of it. Confused, this one is not close, so why is i-

PAAAAAINNNN!

Teeth sink into the main body of this one, piercing through armor and ripping 7% of it away. HOW! PREDATOR DID NOT APPROACH!

See the predator's mouth chewing on this one's main body.

Hatred.

PAAAIINNN!

Another attack, even though the predator is so far!

Move! Away from the predator!

PAINNNN!

28% of main body is gone. Must repair, but the predator keeps attacking. HOW? IS NOT EVEN CLOSE!

Great One, the Supreme One can attack you from anywhere it is, as long as it can see you! You must hide!

HIDE!?

NO! ALREADY ENGAGED WITH PREDATOR! IS COWARDICE!

Turn around, move back to the predator. Leap!

Paiiinnn.

The predator's legs attacked the main body, sending it tumbling away.

Vibrations in air, just before the predator attacks from a distance again.

DODGE!

Snap!

Hear teeth snap against each other, wave eye tentacles.

Finally know what is happening, but…

Impossible!

Whenever the predator attacks, part of its body disappears and reappears next to this one!

More vibrations DODGE!

Dodge dodge dodge dodge dodge!

FRUSTRATED!

Can’t get close!

Each time this one tries to move closer, another attack comes, driving it back.

33% of main body is gone, right foreleg is crushed, hanging limply.

Repair.

Hungry. This fight is consuming all of the reserved biomass in this one’s stomach.

LET YOUR BRAIN BE RIPPED OUT FROM ITS SKULL! Mind-Walker screeches through the psionic link.

The predator staggers! Charge!

DODGE!

ANGRY!

The prey swipes at this one, it's foreleg disappearing and reappearing multiple times, forcing this one to move back Then looks at Mind-Walker.

Dodge Mind-Walker, you must dodg-

It is too late! Mind-Walker is not as fast as this one.

Watch as the foreleg swipes at the air, reappearing next to Mind-Walkers flank. She can't move away in time, and it hits her, send her crashing into a tree.

Mind-Walker is… still.

Hatred.

Charge!

DODGE! DODGE DODGE DODGE!

Howllllll!

Hate consumes this one. COWARDICE! HOW DOES THIS ONE EVEN APPROACH, ATTACK, IF IT KEEPS SWATTING IT ASIDE!

Mind-Walker was able to confuse it, just for a moment. Through the psionic link.

FRUSTRATED! IF ONLY THIS ONE COULD USE THE OTHER CORE ABILITIES! Then this one could use its tentacles, like it promised.

Predator begins moVI**NG TOWARDS MIN*D-WALKER!***

MUST. NOT. LET. IT. EAT.I

Charge!

Dodge! Dodge!

Charge!

PAINNN!I

It's paws hit this one, ***PAIN*** as the main body hits a tree.

The predator keeps moving.

A feeling builds in this one's Core.

Stronger than annoyance. Stronger than frustration.

Even stronger than hatred.

Rage.

Something in the Core snaps.

Sensations overwhelm the main body. Hunger, satisfaction at killing annoying wolf, smugness, annoyance at the strange wolf with shapes growing from it, urge to eat, sleep, and eat more.

These sensations are not from the main body?

From… the predator!

Feel it, the connection. Between this one's brain and the predator's.

Must eat the wolf, before stranger wolf attacks my body. Must gather as much food as possible, before the bare-leaf begins, and sleep overcomes my body.

No time to think about it.

Rely on **instinct** now that the connection is formed.

RIP IT'S MIND OUT, AWAY FROM IT'S BRAIN! PULL, TEAR, SCRAPE THIS ONE'S MIND AGAINST IT! DO AS MUCH DAMAGE, AND ***TEAR*** *IT AWAY!*

The predator shudders, and it turns back to this one.

Hatred. From both this one, and the predator.

How dare the strange wolf attack this one's mind? Must kill it!

Bristle. *Growl.* Wave tentacles.

Another *snap*! The teeth on this one's tentacles tear themselves out, and begin to float around the main body.

Can feel it. The **instinct** that keeps them floating around this one, quivering, waiting to be unleashed.

This one circles the predator. Predator moves foreleg to swipe again-

Instinct.

Think about the pain of being shocked, the poking instruments being held against this one's body. And *push* it against the predator's mind.

Predator howls, flinching. *CHARGE!*

Predator's head lunges forward, attempting to bite this one.

DODGE!

Send teeth straight into the predator's mouth! Shred!

Feel the connection between the teeth and Core fade, but it worked. The predator staggers, now letting out gurgling sounds. Good. Sent 14 teeth into its throat.

CHARGE!

Predator stares up. Feel it through our connection.

The **fear.** It is **afraid** of this one.

THIS ONE CAN USE OTHER CORE ABILITIES! WHICH MEANS IT IS ALLOWED TO USE TENTACLES!

Predator opens mouth to roar, attempts to intimidate.

SEND ALL TENTACLES INTO IT'S MOUTH! DEVELOP TEETH ON TENTACLES!

Predator's eyes bulge as thirty seven tentacles rip through it's mouth, stabbing into it's throat and entering its stomach and intestines.

SEND ALL TEETH ON TENTACLES FLYING OUTWARDS!

Prey's eyes widen further, its body stiffening. Until, finally, it collapses.

VICTORY!

SATISFACTION!

This one killed a predator!

Remove tentacles, wrap them around the main body again.

How is Mind-Walker?

Walk over to her.

…

She is still. Not breathing.

Still.

A different feeling enters this one. Not anger, or frustration. Strange. This one…

She introduced this one to the pack. Taught how to use Core abilities. Brought biomass, and ensured this one was allowed to hunt.

…

well…

Despite the unpleasant feelings, it is a waste fo biomass to leave her here.

Consume.

W-WAIT! WE ARE STILL ALIVE! Do not eat us!

… what?

Mind-Walker stands up, and shakes, her fur ruffling out.

No. Impossible.

Is it possible… Mind-Walker was deceiving this one?

HOW DARE SHE! HOW DARE SHE PRETEND TO BE DEAD!?

You… you were going to eat Us!?

Will steal eat. COWARDICE! TO THE UTMOST DEGREE, to pretend to be dead.

Wave tentacles. STAB!

The foo-biomass, Great One! Don't forget about the biomass! Mind-Walker communicates through the psionic link.

Pause.

Yes… there is other biomass to consume.

And… strange urge to share, with the pack.

Disgust. Why would this one ever do that?

Consume.

Eat eat eat eat eat Core! Eat eat eat eat eat!

Could you… at least let Us have some?

…

No. For being COWARD, and deceiving this one.

Oh come on! Please!?

NO!

Chapter 16: Interferers

“Thank you for the prey, Shape-Changer.” Moon-Gazer yawns. Her pups are asleep, snuggled against her stomach, and she carefully chews the rabbit this one caught to not wake them.

Strange. Two moons ago, this one would have been disgusted at the thought of sharing biomass.

But the pack provides shelter, and safety, for stasises. With their help, this one has learned to use nearly all of its core abilities. Even the Supreme One’s, partial portal creation, which was the hardest to learn.

Except for coward invisibility. Refuse to learn that one.

But overall… pack is worth.

Move to this one’s resting place, close eyes. Prepare to enter stasis.

“Shape-Changer!” Feel a form jump on this one’s main body, bouncing off, and then jumping onto it again. *“Wake up, Shape-Changer!”*

Annoyed.

Open eyes to see who it is.

The smallest previous wolf pup, juvenile now and named Ground-Walker, is tugging at this one's fur with their teeth.

Growl.

"You're awake!"

Ground-Walker is pleased. Annoyed.

Only a moon ago, they would have run back to their mother yelping when this one growled. Now, they ignore it.

Perhaps a light stabbing would make it afraid again?

"Oh stop that, Great One. You cannot simply stab all of your problems away." Mind-Walker communicates,

Confused. All problems and prey this one has, has been resolved with stabbing.

"... right, We forgot about that. Anyways, Star-Reader wants you to take Ground-Walker out to hunt."

Sigh.

Tired. But willing, if it meant more prey.

Stand up, towering over the wolves. This one is now almost as big as Sun-Walker, with its 230% increase in size over the past two moons.

Strangely, this one's size has slowly stopped growing with consumed biomass, which is instead condensed into the structures this one creates. Makes them better, so it is pleasant. But Sun-Walker is still slightly bigger than this one, so also unpleasant.

Calculate Core energy.

33% remaining. Core energy capacity is 20% larger than when this one first joined the pack.

Wiggle.

Energy is enough for a hunt.

Shapeshifting consumes the least amount of Core energy. Portal creation consumes the most, by a large amount.

Will only rely on current structures, to conserve energy. Complete

refined wolf anatomy, bear fat and fur, eagle wings, and of course the superior tentacles. No armor, very little in the forest now can even pierce this one's fat now.

Yawn.

So tired. Will have to enter stasis soon.

"Come on Shape-Changer! Bright light is almost over!" Ground-Walker is already running outside of the den.

Catch a lot of prey, Great One.

Snort.

This one always catches prey. Same can not be said of Mind-Walker. Inferior designs.

Hey!

The bright light is warm on this one's fur. But the air is cold. Coldness doesn't send this one into stasis, anymore, thanks to the blood structure. But still…

It is strange, the leaves have begun to wither and fall off of the trees.

Fall-leaf, the pack calls it. It comes before bare-leaf.

*“You’re so **slow**, Shape-Changer! The prey will go to sleep before we find them!”*

Growl.

Insult to this one’s design. Slow? This one will show you slow.

Run, stabbing tentacles into the ground to move even faster. Quickly pass Ground-Walker, who yelps and tumbles over themself. Smug.

“Wait!”

No! Will not!

Pause.

“Ha! We knew you couldn’t-”

“Hush.”

Sniff.

Sniff sniff.

Prey scent, elk. Lots of fresh scents. Is good, will provide the pack with lots of biomass.

But there is a different scent. Two of them. They are familiar, and also fresh, but cannot place them. Strange.

Not prey, but also not predator.

"*Elk!"* Ground-Walker finally seems to be able to determine.

He immediately lowers to the ground, slinking forwards.

Uneasy.

It is dangerous. But why is it dangerous?

For now, lead Ground-Walker towards the Elk.

The sun moves lower, the sky dimming as bright light leaves. Soon the moons will come, and offer dim light.

And finally, we see the elk.

Male, this one knows instinctively. And young, with no herd of its own yet.

Can also sense a Core. Excitement.

Ground-Walker wiggles, salivating.

"Stop it." This one growls quietly. *"We must move closer, in order to catch it."*

Ground-Walker dips their head in agreement. Move, sneak clo-

BOOOOOM!

PAAAAAIN!

LOUD! SO LOUD!

Distress!

Birds erupt from the trees, startled.

The elk's head erupts, and is gone. Its body stills, then collapses. How!?

Wave tentacles, attempt to locate the source of the LOUD! But can't.

Auditory nervous system is damaged. Can't even hear Ground-Walker. There's another, more insistent noise, caused by the damage.

Shake head. Noise is making this one slightly dizzy.

Remove auditory system, and redevelop it. Better, other noise is gone. Ground-Walker is crouched on the floor, rubbing his paws against his ears.

…

Still.

Shake.

Two figures enter where the elk was.

Recognize structure. Bipedal.

“See? I told you. One shot was all I needed.”

“Whatever. I just hope you can shoot that well when you’re at the range in the Academy. Bet you freeze up again, like you did in middle-school.”

“Shut up!”

Two bipedal figures in armor walk up to prey, one of them carrying a structure this one recognizes.

Now know what the scent was.

Interferers.

Shake.

“Grab its core, would you? Should be able to make some quick cash. Told you coming out here was a good idea, everything’s weak.”

One of the figure crouches down. Produces a… claw? Shiny claw? And cuts into the elk.

Removes the Core.

“Nice! Looks like a class 2 Core. At *least* three hundred reos.”

“Nah, it’s a little small. We might get two hundred, at best.”

“... damn, you’re right. Isn’t this in season for elk? Why the rift was it so small?”

“How am I supposed to know, idiot? This was your ide- hold on, getting a call from Aurora.”

Ground-Walker’s hackles are raising. He growls, padding forward.

“Stop it!”

“But the encroachers are stealing-”

“The interferers are not prey! They will kill us!”

Is not cowardice. Interferers are simply interferers. Best not confront them.

“Yo, what’s up Aury? … Five cores!? Really!?” Detect excitement from the communicating interferer, as the other interferer stands and puts the Core it collected… into its armor? Strange.

“Yeah, yeah. Fuck yeah we’re coming! Just some wolves right? Nothing crazy?”

…

Still.

“Got it, send your location to us and we’ll head right on over.”

“Shape-Changer, what are they say-”

“Be! Quiet!” This one snaps, watching the interferers begin walking.

Wolves? Are they communicating about… the pack?

NO! CANNOT BE! Must be rival wolves.

Interferers move closer. And closer.

And closer.

Tense.

Shake. Can feel it.

The **fear.**

Remember the poking instruments, and the **hunger**, and the **pain, so much pain. Cycles and cycles of pai-**

"*Shape-Changer?"*

"*This one is fine.Just stay quiet."*

…

Relief. Interferers move past us.

"Hey Radith, you have your core sensor on?"

"Oh, my bad. Switched it off after we saw the elk. Give me just a sec… Huh, would you look at that? Just teN METERS AWAY!?"

“What? Where?”

“Over there, dumbass!”

Still.

Interferers gesture to our location with front movement structures.

Ground-Walker growls. But can’t stop him, will make too much noise.

Fear. Interferer is moving towards us. How does it know we are here!?

Crouch down further into bushes, attempt to hide.

More growling. See interferer still. It raises the structure it holds.

It heard Ground-Walker! Walks forward, but slowly.

Develop psionic link. Why did this one not do it earlier? Idiocy!

Ground-Walker, do no-

Oh no.

Ground-Walker charges forward, snarling, at interferer.

NO! STOP, RETREA-

BOOOOOM!

PAIN IN AUDITORY SYSTEM, MORE DAMAGE!

Ground-Walker's head erupts, blood splattering onto the ground.

Freeze.

"Was that it?"

"Nope, sensor is still picking up the one Core, further in."

"Fuck, thing made me jump. At least it's just wolves."

Ground-Walker is still, and interferers surround it, prodding it with their hindlegs.

Fear. Killed Ground-Walker, and did not even see it happen.

But also… the same feeling as when Mind-Walker was hit by the Supreme One.

Rage.

Both feelings are in the main body. Heart quickens, breathing grows faster. *Shake.*

Ground-Walker, the juvenile pup, is… dead. Not deception. Can feel it in Core.

“Well, let’s get the last one then.”

Interferers approach.

The shocking instruments. The hunger. And the PAIINNN. This one remembers it all. And they killed Ground-Walker. Which only adds to the

RAGE.

Interferers are not predator. Interferers are not… But they *are*.

They.

Are.

PREY!

Tentacles erupt from the main body, and this one dashes towards them.

“Holy fucking-”

DO NOT CARE WHAT YOU COMMUNICATE!

STAAAB!

Tentacles pierce the interferers armor. But the interferer raises its structure, points it at main bod-

BOOOOOM!

PAAAAAAAIIIIIINNNNN!

THE MOST PAAAIIINNN THIS ONE HAS EVER FELT!

40% of main body is goNE? DESTROYED IN ONE BLOW?

HATE! INTER! FERERS!

WRAP TENTACLES AROUND INTERFERER!

RIP! RIP THEIR LIMBS FROM THEIR BODY! PIERCE THEIR HEAD!

“MAX!”

‘Max’ stills. But no time to relax. Other interferer raises a smaller version of the structure Max was carrying.

DODGE!

BOOOOOOM!

DODGE DODGE **PAAAINNN BODY IS NOW 60% GONE** DOOOOODGE!

THIS ONE DODGED RIGHT INTO THE PATH OF THE STRUCTURE!

Click.

Click click click click click.

Both this one and the interferer-prey look at the structure it holds.

“... oh.”

DON’T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS, EXCEPT THAT THE LOUD AND PAIN HAS STOPPED!

Separate teeth from tentacles.

“Oh no.”

ATTACK!

Teeth fly through the air, piercing into the interferer-prey’s head, body, and limbs. It stills, and falls backwards.

Look at Ground-Walker. The same feeling as before.

But… **hungry.** Fighting consumed a lot of biomass. Body is still repairing.

So hungry.

Consume.

Eat eat eat **must restore biomass** eat eat Cores! From both interferers! Eat eat eat eat eat.

New structure: Complete Homo (Human) anatomy (Complete advanced bipedal skeleton system, organ system, ph…), complex brain.

… Superior brain?

Doubtful. This one's brain is already very fast at processing. How superior of a design could the complex brain be?

BOOOOM! BOOOM BOOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

More LOUDS, but from a little father away.

… close to the DEN!?

No time to waste! Must develop obviously superior designs, while this one can!

Develop the complex brain!

…

…

Thoughts, ideas, and memories *exploded* into existence in my mind.

Chapter 17: What Remains

A note from Sonkoso

I suggest listening to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_GB25CnfO8 when you reach a DIVE! **BOOOM!** In the chapter.

Information floods into me. The pain was the most pressing, my new brain allowing me to process it down to the smallest detail. But it also allowed me to think through it, problem solve even with agony burning my body up from the inside.

I had to get rid of the two objects that were lodged inside of my body, if I wanted to heal. Whatever material they were made of, it was disrupting the connection I was able to maintain with all of my structures through my Core. Muscles churned, and they were *plopped* out of my body to the ground.

Better. Regeneration has sped up tremendously with them gone. Biomass is being instantly converted to energy for cellular growth. Already, I've repaired about 30% of the damage. But it's not enough.

Tired.

BOOOOOM! BOOM BOOM BOOM!

That brings me to my second course of action. Assisting the pack.

I have to prepare before I went. My first thought is to develop armor. I might have done that, before I developed this new brain.

But I dismiss the thought now. Whatever structures they were using, I know instinctively that the armor would barely hinder it, if it did at all. No, what I need is to be faster.

Reduce overall size. Remove wings. Convert the biomass from those structures into white muscle fibers. Replace most of the red muscle tissue in them with the white muscle. Condense bones, to support the strain these changes would bring. Refine all.

Boom boom booooom!

Breathe in. Breathe out. The amount of information I'm able to process now is staggering. Before, it was all passive, but now I am able to pick out even the smallest details in scent or sound. The rustling of wind in the branches, brushing lightly against my fur. The scurrying of smaller prey, as they attempt to flee from the unnaturally loud noises. Fear scents, blanketing the area, so tantalizingly sweet.

Body is 70% repaired. It will have to be enough.

A new, raw energy courses through my muscles. I can feel it. The biomass it will consume will be staggering, but the performance…

Wrap tentacles around Ground-Walker's body. Develop mouths on tentacles, to consume it while I move.

My muscles tense, pressure building. And then… release.

Boom.

Wind whips around me, past my ears and fur, as my body shoots forward. SUCCESS! The condensed white muscle fiber conversion has a 400% increase in effectiveness!

Devour Ground-Walker while moving.

Trees blur past my vision, blending in different shades of greys, whites and blacks. The sun's light is now completely gone, replaced by the Moons' light. Ground-Walker's body is now completely **devoured**, its biomass quickly being consumed by my new design. Which frees up my tentacles.

My paws lightly skin the ground, barely touching it before sending me flashing forwards again, lightly maneuvering around trees.

Boom! BOOM BOOM!

Wrap my tentacles around one of the trees, sling myself upwards, past the treelin-

And I'm back? On the ground?

…

Wrap my tentacles around one of the trees, slin-

Back again!?

Wrap my tentacles arou-

BACK!?

Forcefully stop my body, skidding to a halt.

Ah. So that's what it is.

Time-Breaker has returned from his hunt, to defend our pack.

As far as I was able to discern during the two moons I've been with the pack, Time-Breaker's Core ability is actually quite simple. It resets everything back a few breaths of time, wiping all of their memories of the event except for *his*… and, for some reason, mine.

Feel a few more iterations of this happening, my body being reset to its sprint before I kill my momentum again.

BOOOM!

Reset.

BOOM BOOM!

Reset.

BOOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

I wait for a few moments, muscles already tensing to stop myself…

But time doesn't reset anymore.

…

Time-Breaker must not have enough Core energy left to use its

ability. MUST HURRY!

Muscles tense, and I explode forwards again, wrap a tentacle around a tree, and send myself flying upwards, breaking the treeline.

I spread out and widen my tentacles. I removed my wings to give myself greater speed, so all I'm able to do is widen my tentacles in a wing-shape to glide. Wind whips around me, my speed still greater than it would have been having to constantly dodge the other trees.

I see the den-tree, much taller than all of the other trees. I'm almost there.

A bright flash of light envelopes the area! Sun-Walker!

BOOOOM!

…

And no more loud noises come.

…

If even three interferer-preys had the same structures as the ones I encountered…

Calculating chance of survival for the pack.

17%.

And if there were only two interferer-prey?

49%.

A new feeling rises up in my body, before settling into my altered stomach.

It's a heavier, denser feeling compared to fear.

I'm almost right next to the den tree. I glide around, and observe with my tentacles.

There are… five interferers.

0% chance of survival for the pack.

And this appears to be true. I see… Time-Breaker's body, and Sun-Walkers, as well as four others lying on the ground just outside of the den. The interferers hold out three Cores, placing them into another interferer's hand. The feeling sinks further.

"The two big ones should be Class 3's, but the small one is probably only a class 2. It displayed some category 2 characteristics, but nothing special. Mostly just asked us why we were killing it's family."

"Well that's… actually dpreessing. God I hate fighting category 2s."

"Whatever, it's good pay. I'll finally be able to rub it in Sariel's fucking face."

"...? Sari- OH! The chick who made you piss yourself! HA! I almost forgot about that."

"SAY THAT AGAIN! I DARE YOU!"

I finally notice...

Mind-Walker's body.

RAGE!

"Hold on, Core sensor's picking up three more signatures, all within ten meters."

HATRED!

"Really? Damn. Isn't this forest supposed to be low class? Why the hell does one wolf pack have… what are we at now? Six cores?"

RAGE!

DEVELOP PSIONIC LINK WITH ALL INTERFER-PREY.

"I'LL REND YOUR FLESH FROM YOUR BONES! I'LL RIP YOUR INTESTINES OUT, AND DEVOUR YOUR CORPSE!"

Core energy is at 14%

TIRED. BUT DON'T CARE. I WILL KILL THEM.

All of the interferers clutch their heads. GOOD!

"WHAT THE FUCK!? ANOTHER CATEGORY 2!?"

DIVE!

BOOOM!

Crush an interferer underneath my main body. Blood mists into the air, while the interferers look at me.

"What the f-"

STAB!

I send my tentacles streaking forwards, piercing into the largest of the interferers. The rest react quickly, pointing their held structures at my main body.

Leap towards the held one, forcing every one of my tentacles into its body.

BOOOM **PAIN** BOOM BOOM *DODGE DODGE DOGE*.

The rest of the interferers fire their structures at me. But my white muscle system is far superior to my previous design, and allows me to dodge almost all of their attacks, except the first. The structure pierces into my body, burning and damaging all of the structures it comes across, before resting uncomfortably against my stomach.

I maneuver the prey I have a hold of in front of me. Interferers pause their attacks.

Idiots.

Four of them left.

"WHAT THE ***FUCK*** IS THAT THING JACK!?"

"HOW IN THE ABSOLUTE RIFT-FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW!?"

"YOU'RE OUR RIFT EXPERT!"

“Is… is Marty… dead?”

“FUCKIN PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER AURY, WE NEED YO-”

All of the tentacles I’ve had consuming biomass inside of… Marty burstoutwards, tearing Marty in half while streaking towards two of the interferiors who have been communicating the most. One of them dodges, firing at my body *dodge*, redirect some tentacles to wrap around a tree.

Pierce the interferer that didn’t dodge, sling myself upwards with it-

“MARISHA!!”

-and glide in the air. BOOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

But none of them hit me.

Marisha points its structure at m- THREAT! PIERCE! Marisha goes limp.

Devour.

Develop scything tentacles.

Wrap my mind around another interferer, strengthen the psionic link.

Fear. Terror. Hatred.

OH GOD OH FUCK MARISHA’S DEAD I DON’T WANT TO DIE WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT FUCK MY GUN IS JAMMED FU-”

Push the thought of the **fear** of poking instruments against its mind, being trapped in a small space, unable to escape the **pain**.

Psionic Blast!

Core energy is at 12%.

So. Tired.

The interferer I targeted stumbles, their structure dropping to the ground as they grab their head.

Rip the interferer I'm holding into pieces, holding different parts as I *dive.*

Crush this interferer beneath me. It doesn't die, so *bite* it's throat.

The interferer gurgles, forearms scrabbling against my head as its eyes go wide.

Dodge.

One of the interferers has collapsed, staring at my body. The other two move protectively in front of it.

"..."

"..."

"Aury. You need to run."

".."

"Aury, get up, and fucking *run.* You're the only one here with a movement based mutation."

"But..."

"MOVE, YOU SHITTY CHODE-FONDLING COWARD! GET UP AND REPORT THIS TO RCO!"

One of the interferers, Aury, stands up. I WILL NOT LET YOU FLEE FROM-

Boom.

Dodge.

Growl.

Prowl around the two remaining interferers. They silently fidget with their structures, replacing one part of it with another.

Shk-shk. Both of the interferer's structures make this sound.

Aury moves, running in the opposite direction, almost as fast as me.

CHAS-

BOOOOM!

DODGE!

Frustrated.

Develop psionic link.

*Guess I'm gonna die here. Not even fifteen, and… fuck. **Fuck**. This was supposed to be a low class forest. God damnit fucking shit fuck.*

I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to...

"Fine. I'll kill you both, and then chase after… Aury, you called her?"

The two interferer's look at each other.

"I fucking hate fighting category 2s."

"...You know what? Same."

…

It's over in just a few moments.

But… the other interferer is long gone. And my Core energy is critically low.

So. Tired.

Processing speed has decreased with Core energy levels.

I can sense movement within the den.

Remove white muscle systems, replace with red muscle. There's an immediate drastic decrease in effectiveness, but the strain on my energy and biomass consumption is lessened.

Drag one of the interferers behind me, eat with my tentacles while walking into the den.

…

Another unfamiliar feeling washes through my body, putting off my exhaustion and hunger.

Pups, juveniles, and adult wolves all lay together, dead.

Wait.

Two of them are moving!

I move closer, and recognize...

…

Star-Reader.

The once almighty **predator** now holds a pup in his mouth, eyes half closed. Wounds cover his body, though the pup is unharmed.

Star-Reader looks at me, air whistling between his nose and mouth as he struggles to breathe.

He drops the pup in between his paws, looking at me through half-lidded eyes. The pup begins whining, trying to tuck in further underneath his body.

"*Shape...Changer…"* He rasps, blood pooling around him even now, as he rests on his belly. "*Come… here…"*

I bow my head in respect. Even if he's dying, he was still… a predator.

He pushes his nose against the pup, nudging it closer to me.

"If you… wouldn't mind… listening to an… old wolf's… last wish…"

I nod. **Tired. I'll have to enter stasis soon.** But it would be cowardice not to listen to Star-Reader's last request.

Star-Reader's eyes close, his head dropping between his paws.

"Good…" He murmurs, nudging the pup towards me, gently, with the remnants of his dwindling strength. *"He is… what remains… of the pack… please… watch over… him."*

The pup whines as it walks over to my body, his eyes still closed. His teeth bite against my fur, searching for… a nipple? I'm able to recall that's what mothers typically have, to provide milk and sustenance.

I maneuver a tentacle to the pup, pushing it against his mouth, and secrete precious biomass. If this is what Star-Reader wants… then in exchange for everything they taught me, I will oblige. The pup immediately starts suckling the biomass from my tentacle, his whining reduced to small whimpers as he lays on the ground.

"*Thank… you…"*

Star-Reader stills, as the last breath leaves his body in a slow exhale.

It's strange. Star-Reader used to fill me with so much fear, and now… now the great predator his gone.

Because of the interferers.

But… that's how life in the forest is. If it wasn't interferers, it would be another Supreme One. Or a rival pack. Or… something like me.

Tired.

I'm too tired to ponder things like this.

The pup is resting against my side, contendly suckling on biomass.

For now…

Stasis.

…

Chapter 18: Becoming Human

A note from Sonkoso

Here's another interesting factoid, did you know that there was another important evolution we as humans had apart from the opposable thumb? It was our ability to sweat. Almost no other mammal possesses this ability, which allows us to travel literally dozens of miles without real rest. This is what our ancestors in Africa used to hunt down prey, as they could obviously travel faster than us, but as time wore on we'd outpace them by sheer perserverance. This is where the inspiration from the Tortoise and the Hare is thought to come from originally.

…

I can feel the pup pawing against my body, whining.

Annoyed.

Sighing, I shake myself awake. Sniff the air.

It’s unpleasant. Death-smell lingers in the area, as micro-structures are already beginning to eat the remains in the area.

I sense vibrations, and send an eye covered tentacle to survey the area outside of the den.

Big birds are surrounding the bodies I hadn’t devoured yet, dark black in the bright light of the sun.

Mmm…

Already, a quarter of the biomass preserved biomass in my stomach has been consumed. My complex brain depletes biomass at almost double the pace the developed brain did. Worrying, but if it comes to it, I can consume the grass if there’s not enough prey.

Thinking of…

For now, I send more tentacles to slither along the grass. Grab two of the big birds, who struggle fiercely.

Constrict.

Crack crack.

Both of the bigger birds go still, and I drag them back to me. The rest of the birds… expel biomass back onto the ground? Weird. Regardless, they flee, landing on the branches of taller trees and looking at the tentacles dragging their kin back inside of the den warily.

So they're not completely giving up on the remains? Interesting.

Consume.

The pup continues to paw at my body, its whining growing more insistent.

Sigh.

Alright, I'll feed you more biomass.

The pup's whines once again become contented whimpers as they suckle on the tentacle.

I've gained the Vulture anatomy from the two birds, which is… not optimized for the way I hunt. Interesting though, they can expel biomass at will to lighten their bodies. Seems inefficient, but in a danger rich environment I can appreciate its uses. They also have a locking structure in their wings, which allow them to glide in the air without consuming biomass like normal flying does. That is the only superior design they seem to have though.

Which reminds me, the Human anatomy!

This is the design that the interferers use. It must have a lot of superior structures.

The human anatomy has a lot of designs that are similar to the ones I've developed, but they all seem to be centered around its complex

brain. Which I can't find fault with, it is a vastly superior structure compared to any of the brains I've used before.

I'll have to develop the anatomy to analyze it further.

Before I do so, I send another eye tentacle outside of the den, to keep an eye on the vultures. Just in case any of them decide to come back down.

And… the two Cores I was able to gather from the humans!

…

Hmm… Incompatible with my Core? **Instinct** assures me that I'll still be able to combine them, but… I won't gain any new Core abilities.

Which is fine. I'm still struggling to incorporate my existing Core abilities into my fighting. So for now...

Develop the human anatomy!

…

Oh no.

Human anatomy incorporates and RELIES ON TRICHROMATIC OCULAR SYSTEM! NOOOOOOO!

PAIIINNN!

PAINN.

PAIN.

Relief.

The pain doesn't last nearly as long as when I first developed my other sensory systems. Maybe because my new brain is designed to utilize it?

I blink open my eyes.

…

…

Strange.

For a few breaths, thoughts escaped my mind.

Colors. Bright and vibrant, far more so than the black, grey, and white I was used to seeing, are on absolutely *everything*. The ground, the trees, the leaves outside. The eyes on my tentacles were also changed to incorporate this new system. Even the sky is a different color.

And then… a new sensation.

Taste.

The previous anatomy had taste, but it was dull, unrefined. This one though… the olfactory system is not as developed in the human anatomy, but it is still superior to others, and it adds to this… taste.

Curious. What do things taste like?

Send tentacles to the grass, develop tongue on tentacles.

…

Not much. Bitter? But just slightly.

One of the vultures has landed again.

Grab with my tentacle, kill it with a quick pierce to its head. The rest of the vultures fly away. Disappointing, but to be expected.

Consume with tentacles.

…

The feathers and skin don't taste like much, but the flesh…

Delicious.

Wiggle.

Crunch on the bones.

Also delicious.

A new feeling wells up within me. A purpose, a drive, besides simply growing and evolving.

I MUST TASTE ALL OF THE DELICIOUS THINGS!

The pup grows quiet, spitting out my tentacle from its mouth and curling up to stasis, and for the first time I feel…

Pity.

Pity for the lifeforms of this forest.

They will never understand the joy of **taste**.

I stand up. Must find more tastes!

…

Strange. I've fallen back down.

My balance is unsteady in this new form. Bring my… hands to the front of my face. Analyze the new anatomy.

…

The bipedal structure has been completed, but it doesn't utilize a tail. Even though it has the supporting designs for it.

Sweat glands, to conserve biomass consumption and reduce heat buildup. Inferior designs when compared to my original heat transfer design, but it is still a superior design to the other anatomies.

And, most importantly…

The hands.

Opposable thumbs! Allows for grabbing things far more efficiently than tentacles or paws. This is how they utilized the structures that caused so much damage and pain, like the poking instruments and

the shooting instruments. Now claws, which would be beneficial for combat, but their instruments make up for that inferior design.

More importantly, from the hormone production system (which is very heavily insisting me to mate, I may have to remove it in the refined design) I can infer that this is a juvenile human. It's muscle density is less than other anatomies, but to compensate for that…

Mmm…

Even with lack of balance, the legs appear to be superior design for combat. They allow for rapid changes in direction when needed. Inferior designs for long-distance or singular direction travel, but… still efficient. Very efficient.

This shall be the new primary anatomy!

Develop tail, to help with stability. Develop partial wolf olfactory and auditory nervous systems, to improve senses. Develop claws and teeth, for combat. Tentacles will primarily emerge from the lower back, but develop a tract for them to emerge from any point in my body in case of emergencies.

Mmm…

Good. Superior design.

Now, to hunt. To taste!

I stand up, my tail helping to stabilize and maintain balance, as my tentacles wave around my body.

The wolf pup comes out of stasis, whining again. Frustration flushes through my body..

If it will prove a hindrance, I could always kill it. Maybe even now…

No. I promised Star-Reader I would care for it. It would be cowardice to not uphold that deal.

Thinking of…

Wrap some of my tentacles around Star-Reader's body, and drag it with me as I walk out of the den. I'll devour it as I move.

For now, I push my tentacle against it, and then secrete biomass onto the ground for it to consume if it becomes hungry again. But I must leave, pup.

I emerge from the den, ducking my head underneath it as I emerge back into the forest.

So many colors! All bright and vibrant.

Sniff.

Past the dead scents, which cover the area and make my mouth salivate, there are fresh prey scents.

Grab three more of the remaining wolves and *devour* them as I move.

Onwards! To discover new tastes!

Chapter 19: Rift Containment Office

A note from Sonkoso

Heya! It's me. Back at it again with another interesting factoid.

So, I've been doing some research into radiation. More specifically, the process of turning radiation into electricity. Did you know that the first ever idea for a hydrodgen powered car came from nuclear power plant designs? To vastly simplify things, heating up water to create hydrogen, which in turn powers the rotors to a car engine? And that Ford actually had a design for a nuclear powered car (which actually functions somewhat similarily to an electric car) called the Ford Nucleon?

“Hey, brought us all some coffee. How’s she holding up?” Fiona heard a deep, gruff voice rumble behind her, and turned her head to see a burly man enter the observation room, carrying three paper cups that seemed childishly small in his large hands. Like her, he was wearing the non-combat uniform of a Containment Agent, a black suit and tie with purple cufflinks.

His form almost burst out from the suit he was wearing, but his eyes were crinkled in concern as he stood by her side, handing her a cup.

Fiona took it gratefully, turning back to look through the observation glass where two people were sitting across from each other in the interrogation room. One, a male nuan inquisitor with grey eyes and silver hair, and the other a female nuan with bright blue eyes and teal colored hair. She had her head lowered, and through the audio receivers in the room they could hear her muffled crying.

“As well as she can be, honestly.” She said, her tone tired. “We’ve had her in containment for just over seven hours now.

“Aurora.” The male inquisitor said gently, his melodious voice almost supernaturally calming… because it was. “I know it’s painful, but you’re doing so well. We just need you to go over the details one more time. Do you think you can do that?”

A silent nod from Aurora, as her shoulders stopped shaking.

“I hate when he does that.” Bill murmured beside her. “Gives me the creeps.”

Fiona had to stop herself from nodding in agreement. It was a valuable core ability, even if ethically controversial.

“Good.” The inquisitor said, his voice silken even over the audio receiver. “Now, would you mind repeating just one more time who all of the members in your party were?”

“Um…” Aurora said, tilting her head, her eyes were clouded as if in a trance. “Radith Surivon, Jackson Hilt, Marisha Moore…” Listlessly she recites a list of eight names, the inquisitor nodding as he inspects his notes.

“Great, thank you Aurora. What is the rough classification and category that you would ascribe to the entity you encountered?”

At the mention of the entity Aurora begins to tremble, clarity returning to her eyes. She bites her lip and looks down, tears already welling up.

“After a…” She hiccups, swallows, and continues on. “After a brief encounter and further review of the event, I would mark the entity as a class 4, category 2. It spoke with us through a psionic link. And it was fast. So… so fast. It killed Griff before we could even react, and… and then it got Marty… and Marisha…”

Fiona shook her head as Aurora began to cry again, and the inquisitor reached across the table to place a hand over hers.

“Thank you, Aurora. You did the right thing, escaping and coming to us to report it.” The inquisitor assured her softly. “Who knows who else might have gone out there without knowing the dangers?”

A meek nod from Aurora, and the inquisitor drew back his hand. “As a selectee for the Academy, I’m sure you’re aware that because you’ve had contact with a possible category 2 entity, you’ll have to stay here until we’re sure it hasn’t… well. If you need *anything*, you just press this button right here and we’ll come and see what we can

do. Okay?"

Another nod, and the inquisitor stood up from his chair, gathering his files. He gave Aurora a comforting squeeze on the shoulder before exiting the interrogation room.

The door to the observation room opened, and the inquisitor stepped through, heaving a sigh.

"You did good Athus." Bill said, turning around to sit at the table in the middle of the room. "Some coffee for you."

Athus took it, placing his folder down gently and joining Bill at the table, taking small sips.

"Thanks. Just…"

"No fourteen year old girl should have to go through this?" Fiona finished his thought, joining her team, and Athus nodded sadly.

"That's just part of life, here. Especially for Academy students and selectees." Bill grunted, downing his cup in one gulp. Wiping off some of the coffee that had slipped into his beard, he removed a bag from his jacket and placed it onto the table.

"Her circlet?" Fiona asked, looking at it wearily.

"Yup. Just got it back from our PA guys. No psionic tampering with the feed, so we're good to review it."

Fiona barked a laugh. "That'd be the sovvy on top with this. Bleeding out from our eyes as we tried to figure out what happened."

There was a round of dark chuckles that held no humor to them, and she tapped on the circlet.

A holographic screen appeared, displaying a list of options for them to choose, ranging from apps to social media to phone calls. What they were looking for, however, was the circlet's camera roll. Finding the most recent video, they played it. The footage was captured from Aurora's point of view, and started just after they had entered the forest, as was protocol when entering a classified zone.

-

“Hoo boy, you guys ready to make some cash?” One of them hooted to Aurora’s right, out of view. The girl at the front spun around to glare at the hidden speaker, her mouth in a straight line and hands loosely shouldering her rifle.

“That’s not what we’re here for. This is approved combat training for Academy selectees.” She snapped, and groans echoed out.

“Marisha, we all know that. But this is a low class zone, a 3 will be the most dangerous thing we’ll meet and that’ll be rare.” Aurora said, causing Marisha to roll her eyes and turn back to the front.

“What’s got her ass all clapped?” A voice asked to Aurora’s left.

“Her folks are instructors at the Academy. Probably trying to make mommy and daddy proud.” The original voice grunted. “Yo Marisha! Keep acting like that and we’re not going to split any of the money with you!”

She flipped them off, which was followed by loud laughter from the group.

-

Fiona looked around the table, noting the grim expressions on the faces of the agents. Teenagers having fun, with no clue as to what was waiting for them in that forest.

“I’m going to skip ahead, to about fifteen minutes prior to engaging the entity.” She said, earning nods from her team.

She circled her fingers through the circlet, and the video sped up. There was a blur of movement, a wolf with dozens of tentacles flashing onto screen, and she rewound the video to the agreed time.

-

“-las, Radith, both of you split that way, see if you can’t pick up any more core signatures. The rest of us will track down the pack, see if they have any cores.” A man was instructing the group, presumably the leader. Two of them nodded, checking their ammo and then peeling away, carefully stalking through the underbrush.

He turned to look at another, thinner member of the group. “Jackson, if they do have cores what categories can we expect from them?”

Jackson scratched his head, as if trying to remember any information he had on rift entities. “Cat 3s, mostly, if I’m remembering right. Maybe a cat 2? There are records of cat 1s and 7s, but those are extremely rare in wolf mutants. We shouldn’t have to worry about those in this low class of a zone.”

The man nodded. “Class?”

“Mostly 2s, though depending on how old the pack is there might be a class 3. *Maybe.*”

Another nod. “And what’s everyone’s core energy looking like?”

“I’m sitting at about a quarter left.” Aurora offered, and the others voiced similar levels.

“Alright, we’ll make this our last catch of the day and head back. Make sure no one dips below a tenth, just in case we run into something on the way out.”

“Sir yes sir!” Their Rift expert mock saluted, earning a playful shove from their leader as the rest of the group followed in behind him.

There was a gunshot in the distance, and the group all looked at each other.

“Well damn, I didn’t think they’d pick one up already.” Aurora giggled, shaking her head.

They tracked the wolves back to their den, a gargantuan tree that appeared to be hollowed out in the middle, and the leader held up his hand.

“I’m getting five core sigs from the den.” He whispered, turning his head to Aurora. “Call the other two back in. This might be rough going.”

A nod from Aurora. “Yo, Hurrent says to come on back. We’ve got the pack at five core signatures. Yes really, five. You coming or not? Yup, just wolves. Alright, see you here soon. Sending my locale to you.” There’s an audible *boop* as the call ends, and Aurora turns back to Hurrent. “They’re coming.”

“How far away are they?”

“Transceiver says just a little under a kilometer.”

“Alright, we’ll give them ten.”

There’s only a few moments between Hurrent saying that, and another gunshot ringing out. Which is quickly followed by more gunshots.

-

Fiona pauses the video.

“You think the two that split off ran into the unidentified entity?” Bill’s rumbled question hangs in the air, heavy and dark.

“I think that’s probably the safe assumption.” Fiona agreed, sighing,

and Athus rapped his knuckles against the table.

“We might as well finish it out.” He murmurs. Wordlessly, Fiona presses play.

-

Silence hangs over the group, as the last of the gunshots linger in the air before fading to nothingness.

For a few moments, they say nothing. It’s Marisha who speaks first.

“You don’t think that they…” She trails off, as if afraid to finish her thought.

Aurora quickly shakes her head. “No, definitely not. It’s a low class zone. They probably found more mutants and decided to bag ‘em up.”

There’s a few hesitant nods from the group, before a twig snaps somewhere to their left.

Instantly all of them spin around, rifles raising, and a large wolf enters the video feed. For a few tense moments neither side does nothing, simply staring at each other. Then, the wolf wheels around and attempts to escape.

Gunshots ring through the air, and the wolf goes down.

“Alright everyone, we’re pushing in. Aurora, keep an eye on their locations, let me know if they start moving towards us.”

“Got it.”

What followed could only be described as a massacre. The group approaches the den, as wolves charge out of it to defend their home. Like a well oiled machine the team moves in unison, gunning down any that get close. The video blurs as Aurora moves with blinding

speed, quickly changing positions anytime a wolf got too close and firing on it. The others display core abilities of their own, whether it's raising up a massive wall of earth only to slam it back down onto another wolf, launching another wolf in the air with telekinesis and shooting it before it hits the ground, or water emerging from waterskins only to harden into sharp icicles which are sent streaking towards their targets.

Aurora's feed blurs again as another wolf, this one almost the size of a horse, lunges at her. Then, strangely, it collapses before she shoots it as if it were exhausted.

Another large wolf, though slightly smaller than the one before it, races into the clearing, fire erupting from its jaws in a bright flash of light. A wall of earth erupts in front of the flames, diverting them and saving Aurora. She calmly takes aim and fires, the wolf's head erupting.

The group calmly walks into the den, killing any wolf they find. Then, they walk out, and begin harvesting the cores from their corpses.

Jackson walks over to Aurora, handing her three cores to stow away in her pack.

"The two big ones should be Class 3's, but the small one is probably only a class 2. It displayed some category 2 characteristics, but nothing special. Mostly just asked us why we were killing it's family."

"Well that's… actually depressing. God I hate fighting category 2s." Hurrent shudders, pressing his boot against a smaller wolf.

"Whatever, it's good pay. I'll finally be able to rub it in Sariel's fucking face." Aurora shrugs, pocketing the cores.

"...? Sari- OH! The chick who made you piss yourself! HA! I almost forgot about that." Jackson practically doubles over in laughter.

"SAY THAT AGAIN! I DARE YOU!"

Hurrent suddenly straightens, raising his rifle back towards the den. "Hold on, Core sensor's picking up three more signatures, all within

ten meters.”

“Really? Damn. Isn’t this forest supposed to be low class? Why the hell does one wolf pack have… what are we at now? Six cores?”

Suddenly they all double over, clutching their heads, two of them immediately vomiting.

One of them straightens, looking around wildly, as if trying to find the source of their pain.

“WHAT THE FUCK!? ANOTHER CATEGORY 2!?”

-

“And this is where they make contact with the unidentified entity?” Fiona asks, and Athus nods.

“So far it’s matching with the report Aurora gave me.” He said.

They resumed the video, jumping in surprise at what happened next.

Aurora had been right. It *was* fast.

-

There was a muffled boom, like a cannonball slamming into the ground, as blood and dust erupted into the air. Where there had just been a screaming teammate of Aurora’s, now there was only misted blood hanging in the air, as well as… *something*, lightly obscured by the dust.

It was pitch black, and dozens of tentacles writhed in the air around it. Each one had countless eyes on them, and whatever space wasn’t occupied by an eye had teeth protruding out of it. The tentacles

ended in vicious looking barbed hooks, painting terrible images of what would happen if they grabbed something.

The figure vaguely resembled a wolf, but something about it just… unnerved those who watched it. Like it was only pretending to be something it wasn't.

Amber eyes pierced through the haze, and suddenly all of the tentacles stopped at once, turning to another member of the group.

"What the f-" Aurora wasn't even able to finish her sentence before the tentacles streaked towards someone else. The force of it piercing through his body armor lifted him off the ground.

Finally the shock seemed to wear off, and the team raised their weapons and fired in one smooth motion. Only one bullet seemed to hit it as it ran, launching itself powerfully off of the ground to land sideways on a tree, then hopping between them and using them as cover, all the while dragging the poor boy it had grabbed behind it and stabbing him repeatedly with more tentacles.

Finally it landed, maneuvering the boy's body in front of it. The group paused, taking the time to reload their weapons.

Aurora's hands were shaking, and she sank to the floor, her rifle lowering between her legs.

"WHAT THE ***FUCK*** IS THAT THING JACK!?" Hurrent screamed somewhere out of view of the camera.

"HOW IN THE ABSOLUTE RIFT-FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW!?"

"YOU'RE OUR RIFT EXPERT!"

"Is… is Marty… dead?" Aurora whispered, the camera still focused on the entity. Marty's stomach and chest were bulged and writhing with what looked like hundreds of snakes shifting inside of him. Thankfully the poor boy already seemed dead.

"FUCKIN PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER AURY, WE NEED YO-"

Suddenly Marty exploded in two, viscera and gore showering the

ground as the tentacles that had been inside of him launched to find new prey. Aurora turned to follow them, in time to see Hurrent leap out of the way, rolling deftly and raising his weapon.

Marisha was not as quick.

Hurrent fires two more rounds, but the entity is too fast, jumping to the side, and the tentacles have already grabbed her. More tentacles have wrapped around a tree, and as it runs they coil tightly and then launch it into the air.

-

Fiona stops the video, and turns off the circlet. She'd seen a lot, during her time as a Rift Containment Agent, but that display of pure brutal efficiency had sickened her to her stomach. Bill grunted in agreeance, while Athus was pale and shaking.

"I'd heard her describe it…" He said, his voice faltering. "But to see it… Makers above."

Fiona couldn't help but agree with him.

"So, what classification and category would you give it?"

Bill bowed his head in thought. "It's unclear whether or not its tentacles are a result of its mutation, or if it has a shape changing core ability. Even people sometimes develop tentacles as a result of their mutation. I'd still like to label it a category 6, just to err on the side of caution. As for classification… I know I wouldn't want to fight that thing without a squadron to back me up, and at least one or two core users or psionics. Maybe both. Class 4 seems appropriate."

"I'm going to have to say Bill is right." Athus said, taking deep gulping breaths to help steady his nerves. "If anything, I say we bump it up to a class 5 and order an extermination te-"

"You will do no such thing." A voice interrupted them, and they all

hurriedly stood up to greet the figure standing in the doorway.

“Good evening, Colonel.” Fiona hurriedly said, and he nodded.

“As you were.” He snapped, stepping through, and immediately a team passed him to enter the smaller observation room. Among them were a few special agents, soldiers, and…

The Colonel gestured to the man who was the last to walk through. He looked haggard, with deep eye bags and greasy, messy hair, like he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in months. “Allow me to introduce you. This is Doctor Rester. He will be briefing you on what we believe to be is his escaped experiment, X1. X1 is not to be killed. He is to be contained and recaptured, for further study.”

Fiona looked between the haggard Doctor, and the circlet resting on the table, still reeling from what she had seen. Finally, the only word she could think of slipped out of her mouth.

“Fuck.”

Chapter 20: Fleeing the Forest

The Zeta-series was a success.

That's what we believed.

Muffled coughing, rough and coarse

As much as I'm loathe to admit it, using stillon based anatomy for a test subject was an inspired idea by Doctor Rester. And it adapted wonderfully.

Within hours of its growth, it began developing a core. This was unusual, as carbon based lifeforms that have the capability to grow a core typically don't begin doing so until their body has already mostly developed. Zeta-One, however, seemed to mold its form around the function of its core, deviating from the biomap we'd developed. But rather than terminating the experiment when deviation began to occur, we decided to observe. This was our best chance to observe how Rift entities formed, and we were astounded. Their bodies seemed to develop the necessary properties to exhibit the best results of their core properties.

Multiple people screaming in the distance, followed by distant gunfire

*And what a success *more coughing, intense and racking this time* it was. Just a week after incubation, Z1 was fully functional, and displayed above average intelligence for a newly formed Rift entity.*

How could we have known what it was?

Who could have known?

The coughing lasts nearly a full minute this time

Ah damn. There was blood in that one.

More coughing, the sounds of gunfire echoing down hallways

The first few tests were promising. It adapted quickly, and displayed category 4 characteristics, a rare archetype this far from a Rift. After just a week, its reality debicules were measured at 10.34, and growing by the

hour. A gift, we had thought. A miraculous development, one that would advance the study of Rift entities by years.

And then it escaped its enclosure.

We checked surveillance again, and again. When we realized how it had done so, it was too late.

It had already opened a Rift, right in our laboratory.

And what stepped through…

My team had already begun killing each other before I could order them to consume their mental blockers.

Retching, along with muffled curses

They've almost found me, I can hear them running through the halls.

Ha. Ha ha.

What a fool I was, Rester. In my haste to surpass you, I've doomed us all.

Retching, and the sound of something large and wet slapping against stone

Apologies… are in order. What Z1 summoned…

The screaming is much closer, and is followed by crazed laughter. Voices chant, low and barely audible

May God… help us all.

-End of recovered audio log from the head of lab three's research and development team, Doctor Charlie Grant

---

A large eighteen-wheeler semi-truck, flanked by three other police cars, travels down the highway, eerily silent, with all of its

passengers strangely stable. A human male with buzzed black hair and scars covering his face and scalp sits on one of a ring of cushioned seats, a rifle resting in his lap, carefully pointed away from the twelve other passengers in the back of the truck.

“Alright boys and girls, I know that some of you, looking at you Ramon, caught a nap on the way here. And some of you, again looking at you Ramon, have a habit of forgetting mission details during these naps. So let me remind you.” He says, his voice oddly high and clear compared to his hard appearance. “This is a low-contact, non-lethal task. If you encounter any mutants in the forest, you are to hit it with a tranq and keep moving. We’ll be moving in two groups, one core user per.”

He nods his head to the left row of seats, which house five people on them. “Team one will be hunting with me, in the first and second quadrants. Team two,” He gestures to the other side, which holds seven people, “you’ll take the third and fourth quadrants. Our target is a black wolf with tentacles, but it’s a cat 6, recorded with both cat 1 and 2 characteristics. Keep in mind that it could have changed its form in the week since last contact. Eyes open, head low to the ground. When you encounter it, orders are to tranq it, but be warned that it may be able to eject the tranquing fluid from its body. According to intel, it has an adverse reaction to electricity, so hit it with static rounds if the tranqs prove ineffective.”

There’s a round of nods, and the truck slows to a stop.

“Masks on. It can understand human speech, so psionic communication is our primary. Let’s move.”

The group of thirteen dons their masks, completing their ever shifting camouflage armor as six bright lights slowly dull on each helmet, and the group pours out of the truck, slinking into the forest as their armor rapidly bends light to obscure them.

“Good hunting everyone.”

I leap away, dodging an attack from a kin-prey.

Recognize structures, digitigrade legs, eight scything tentacles on its sides, three eye tentacles waving from its back. It crouches, scything tentacles returning back to its main body to hover protectively around it.

Smug. The digitigrade legs may be superior for single direction movement and ambushes, but they are inferior in fights.

I have already fought against this kin-prey. Easy source of biomass.

Yip! Yip Yip!

Sigh.

The wolf pup squirms in the pouch I've made on my back, looking at the kin-prey defiantly. *Snorts*, and looks at me.

Yes pup. It is an enemy.

Yip!

The kin-prey looks at us, perhaps confused? Does not matter. Refine white muscle system. Develop scythes on hands and arms.

Activate space warping Core ability, *stab* at the air next to me with my scythe arm.

There's a shriek of pain, as the kin-prey (Hunters, I've unlocked their inferior anatomy after eating two of them) organs are pierced by my scythe.

The hunter rips itself free of my scythe, and charges at me. It's fast, but…

Smug. I am faster.

I stab my tentacles into a tree, pulling my body and jumping at the same time, leaving ten tentacles behind. It runs into them, scything tentacles severing ***pain*** four of the tentacles I've left. The rest wrap around its body.

It lets out a distressed wail as the teeth tear into its flesh.

Jump into the air, as the hunter severs the tentacles around it.

Develop armor on tentacles. Send them into the ground around it. And *pull* my body back down.

The hunter looks around, confused, before it finally sees my main body.

Too late.

Three scything tentacles are sent towards me, but I twist my body around them, crossing my arms in front of me and *slashing* at the hunter, cutting off its head and twisting to land on my feet.

It stumbles, then collapses and stills.

There have been a lot of kin-prey lately, and they've hunted a lot of the other preys in this forest. Which is unpleasant, because the kin-prey tastes bad.

Yip!

The little one doesn't agree with me, as it scrambles out of my pouch to look at the prey. Its nose sniffs the air, and its mouth begins to drool.

Fine.

I wrap my tentacles around it and separate its body into parts; limbs, two pieces of torso, and it's head. Give the pup a leg to chew on in the pouch, and *devour* the rest.

Disgusting. And...

Sniff.

Disdain. The hunter didn't even have a Core.

The only Core I've obtained in the past fifteen awake cycles was Star-Reader's Core. Which…

Reluctant. Don't want to admit it, but…

I don't know how to use the ability, minor clairvoyance.

Sigh. If only the wolf pack was still around to teach me.

List of available Core abilities: Analyzation and adoption, shapeshifting and major regeneration, psionic link and assault, minor telekinesis, invisibility, minor osteokinesis, moderate electrokinesis, electroreception, space warping (minor teleportation), minor clairvoyance.

Core energy is at 31%.

Tired.

Change back to wolf anatomy, it consumes less biomass than being human. But I'll keep the complex brain, obviously. And the pouch that the pup is in, still chewing on its leg. Strangely, my human shape has not changed much with my increased biomass, even though the wolf anatomy has grown by 40%. My wolf anatomy is now bigger than Time-Breaker's.

Walk back to the den, trailing my mouth tentacles on the ground behind me, devouring the grass. I had the idea ten awake cycles ago. Though *only* eating grass is inefficient, if I ate it with my tentacles while traveling, the efficiency would increase drastically.

Smug. Truly, the complex brain is the most superior design among all others.

Wiggle.

The sun is almost gone from the sky by the time I make it back to the den. I'm being forced to travel further and further away to find prey.

… I may have to move soon. But where? Even my first home was inside of the forest, just in a different place. What is there outside of it? Is there anything outside of it?

…

Too tired to think of that for now. Stasis first, then think of moving.

The pup climbs out of the pouch, pressing its body against my fur.

Stasis.

…

Except… for some reason…

Core energy is at 25%.

My Core energy is being depleted rapidly. And I'm getting the ***instinct*** to moVE!

I MUST GRAB THE PUP AND **MOVE**!

Charge out of the den DODGE TO THE LEFT!

Feel vibrations in the air, wave eye tentacle.

There's a strange structure sticking out of the ground where I was about to enter stasis. Strange, it looks like a porcupine's quill, but… different.

MUST DODGE TO THE RIGHT!

Another quill lodges into the ground.

Core energy is at 23%.

But why? What ability am I using that is draining the energy? And how is the **instinct** to dodge coming?

AND WHERE ARE THESE ATTACKS *DODGE* COMING FROM!?

Wave eye tentacles DODGE DODGE and search for the attackers.

Frustrated. Can't find them. INVISIBILITY? HAH! YOU THINK YOU ARE SAFE BECAUSE YOU ARE INVISIBLE!?

Activate electroreception! Useful for finding coward invisible prey that are close to the mai-

THERE ARE SEVEN OF THEM! All close to me.

The pup is squirming. For now, put it into my pouch, and seal the pouch. Still allow air to pass through, inferior designs require air.

Wave eye tentacles. Still cannot see them.

FRUSTRATED!

Growl.

DODGE DODGE! Fine! You will hide from this one?

Send tentacles to the electronic signals, wrap and *constrict!*

PAIIINNNN!

All of the tentacles I wrapped around them are severed.

There's a feeling in the back of my brain. I can sense psionic link communication happening, but when I attempt to form the link with them it is blocked.

BANG BANG BANG!

LOUD!

PAAAAAIIIIIIINNNNN!

The same pain as poking instruments!? HOW! AND FROM A DISTANCE!?

Ten percent of my main body has been destroyed by just three attacks.

…

NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE!

TIME FOR COWARDICE! FLEE!

"The target is running away!"

Wait. I recognize that form of communication.

HUMANS! WHY IS IT ALWAYS **HUMANS THAT ARE THE THREAT!?**

Jump from tree to tree, wrap my tentacles around a a branch and fling myself into the air. Develop wings! Fly fly fly fl-

BANG BANG *PAIIIINNNNNNN! BANG PAIN BANG BANG PAIN BANG PAIN!*

My wings are destroyed.

NOT GOOD! CRASHING BACK DOWN TO THE TREES!

There's a rush of colors and *pain* stabs through my body as branches scratch at me.

The pup whimpers as we fall. *GRAB* a branch with tentacles and sling myself forwards.

SENSE EVEN MORE HUMANS ! THEY'RE SO FAST! HOW!?

The other humans were not as fast as these.

Is it possible… the humans I killed were weak?

I must move faster.

Refine white muscle system. Refine it again. And again!

Hungry. And tired. So tired.

Core energy is at 11%

Biomass is being consumed faster than it ever has before.

But…

I tense my muscles and shoot forward, the trees blurring past me. I'M SO FAST!

***BAAANG BANG* BANG B**ANG bang bang.

The get farther and farther away. But just a few breaths later...

Stagger.

My body collapses and I roll to a stop.

Core energy is at 8%.

So… tired…

The pup whimpers, shaking in the pouch.

I must have lost them by no-

Sense vibrations in air.

…

Growl.

Reluctant.

But the vibrations are getting closer.

DON'T WANT TO! IT IS COWARDICE!

The vibrations are getting even closer.

FINE!

…

Activate…

…

Activate invisibility.

I huddle against a tree, shaking. It is COWARDICE, but… necessary.

A few breaths later, and the humans rush past me. They make no noise, and use the same invisibility, but I can still sense them through electroreception.

…

Relief. Deactivate invisibility.

So. Tired.

Frustrated.

Why do I have to run away from the humans? And why do they keep attacking me?

…

Actually, humans attacked the pack before. Is it because I'm a wolf?

…

Perhaps… if I'm also human, they won't attack me?

Use precious remnants of my Core energy to develop the human anatomy.

Come to think of it, the humans also have strange armor. But the base human anatomy does not have it. Are they superior forms of humans?

I don't like the idea of being an inferior human. But I don't have the armor…

But it didn't look complicated.

I'll just change my skin to match it. That should work.

Core energy is at 6%.

This is bad. My body's starting to shut down, attempting to enter stasis on its own.

"What in the hell are you doing out here? This forest is prohibited until further notice." A voice says, and I still.

A human! A human I didn't sense, because I turned off electroreception to conserve Core energy.

I turn around. The human is still invisible, and I don't want to

activate electroreception again. I might enter stasis right now if I do.

I have to communicate with the human.

“Thanks doc?” I say.

“... Hunting team, this is one of the members of your escort. I've got an unidentified person here. Now, you, what is your identification number?” The human says, closer now.

They don’t believe me. I can hear it in their voice. But I have to try again.

“Identification number.” I repeat back to them.

Hear a *cl-*

NOPE!

Tentacles erupt out of my back, sweeping the area.

PAAAINNN but I’ve GOT THEM!

Develop scythe arms, dash over to ***pain***them and STAB!

The human lets out a shriek before I STAB it again.

MOVE MOVE MOVE MOVE!

The other humans will be here soon!

Wrap tentacles around a tree again, and LAUNCH myself forwards!

…

There are no trees here? And why is it so bright WHAT IS THAT **BIG THING COMING TOWARDS M-**

Chapter 21: Friendly Human

“Come on mate, I’ve got to get this to Mackadon by sixteen.” Joey Gruschwald grumbled, leaning out of his semi-truck window to glower at the police officer blocking his route.

“I’m sorry sir, this road is currently under a no travel order. A class 5 Rift entity has been recorded in the area.” Came the exasperated sigh of the police officer.

“And fahking what ye cunt? My boss wouldn’t care if it was a class 6, he’d still blow my ass out the fahkin’ wuhter if he’d heard I was a *sehcond* late.”

The officer sighed, struggling to keep his tone and expression neutral.

“I understand that sir, but I can’t allow you to drive through.” He said, his tone exceptionally even. “If I recall correctly, there’s another road that leads to Mackadon a little ways back.”

Joey rolls his eyes. “Alright mate. That’s almost three hundred kilometers, I might as well just head back to Sacison.”

“Then I suggest you do that sir.”

Almost as if highlighting the officer’s point, gunfire begins to ring in the distance. Joey raises an eyebrow, and the officer shrugs.

“Class 5.” Is all he says.

Joey huffs, and there’s a piercing *beep, beep, beep* as the truck reverses into a three point turn, before it drives off in the other direction.

“Fahkin blue boys, closin’ down highways.” He growls, tapping on his transceiver to make the call he dreads.

“Ah, Joey. What’s got you callin me?” Comes a voice over the line, just nasally enough to be aggravating. Leo’s fingers curl over his wheel until his knuckles turn white, but he at least makes an attempt to keep the annoyance out of his tone.

“Hey boss. Boys in blue closed down the route, cat 5 about apparently. I’m not gonna be able to make the delivery until at least twenty two.”

There’s a long pause, as the person on the other end of the call processes this.

“GOD DAMNIT JOEY, THIS IS YOUR THIR-”

“I’m sorry boss! It’s really out of my control. Take it up with the fahkin department ay?” Leo snaps, interrupting the voice, which falls silent for a time.

“Alright Jay. But one more FUCKING LATE DELIVERY, and you’re *gone*. Understand!?”

Joey sighs, his semi rumbling down the road. “Yeah boss, I got i-WOAH FAHKIN SHIT!

Suddenly a dark shape hurls itself in front of his semi, and before he can even stomp on the brakes the truck impacts against something solid, slamming his head forward as airbags deploy, the vehicle skidding to a halt.

“Joey? Joey, you alright?”

Joey sits hunched over in his seat, his knuckles white and tightly grasping the steering wheel as he gasps for air, eyes wide and straining to get a view of *whatever* it was he had just hit past his dashboard.

“I think I hit somethin boss. I’ll call ye back.” He says, frantically scrambling out of his seat and climbing out of the truck, his heavy frame heaving as he sucks in air wildly. He slowly approaches the front of his truck, dread growing in the pit of his stomach as a vivid scene of organs splashed along the highway and a carcass caught in the grills of his semi paints his mind.

Finally, Joey spots a limp form, lying still on the road.

Oh no.

The… kid, now that he's gotten a closer look, that he hit is lying limp on the road, still breathing, but otherwise unmoving. For just a moment he feels the urge to call emergency services, but he knows it'd be faster to just drop the kid off at a hospital than the time it would take for an ambulance to arrive.

The question that comes next hangs heavier than anything else in his mind, like why the kid looked relatively fine - even if knocked out - despite having launched himself into a forty ton semi truck, or why there was a small wolf pup crawling out of a fleshy pouch on the kid's back to lick his hair, was…

Why was he naked? And why were there so many tentacles around him?

Sniff.

It…

STINKS!

AWAKE! OUT OF STASIS!

It *stinks* so bad! Almost as much as porcupine prey!

"Woah, easy there mate. Ye took a nasty fahkin tumble." A voice - a *human* voice - communicates to my left.

Wave tentacles, prepare for threat. Humans are always a threat. PIER-

But I pause.

I can feel… something odd resting on my skin. It is soft, but a different kind of soft from fur.

"… ah fahkin hell mate, glad I was right in assuming yeh were mutated." The human says, completely undeterred by my tentacles. "No other way yeh survived diving in front of me truck like that. Had me right worried for nothin."

… wait.

There's… something familiar in the intruder's way of communication. Something that reminds me of home.

Finally, I turn my head and wave eye tentacles to study this human.

Big human. Very big. Lots of biomass to offer. Fur (Hair, subtly different from fur in human anatomy) covers its arms and face.

Hungry.

Begin to move tentacles towards it…

"Well mate, seeing as you're recovered well enough, I figure you're pretty hungry. I'd be, takin a tumble like that." The human says, and I pause. It offers me a… stick? But very short stick.

"Here ye go kiddo, oughta fill yeh up, least until we can get some decent food in ya."

Food!? Where!? In the stick!?

The human passes it over to me, eyes focused ahead of it. I take the stick tentatively.

Sniff.

Sniff sniff.

Strange. It has very slight smell, but…

"What, you're actin' like you've never seen a protein bar before." The human says, still not looking at me. But I can detect… amusement in its tone?

I didn't even know humans could *be* amused. I thought it was all aggression.

Sniff.

Bite.

…

DELICIOUS!

WHAT IS THIS!?

TASTES SO GOOD!

“Thanks Doc!” I say, eating the rest.

Very happy.

Wiiigggle.

“Ha! I ain’t no doc, but glad ye like it. That’s my favourite brand” The human says, and I detect… satisfaction in its voice.

I finally recognize why this human reminds me of home.

It has the same communication patterns as Carl.

Wiggle.

Carl was a good human.Very rare. Unlike Mr. Standesh, bad human.

“More?” I ask, looking at the human, and it gives another breath burst of amusement.

“Sure, here you go kid.” It says, offering me another protein bar. EAT!

SO GOOD! And high in biomass, despite its small size!

Is this a human structure? Able to condense biomass into such a small form?

Ah, thinking of biomass… THE PUP!

STAR-READER GAVE ME THE PUP TO WATCH, WHERE IS IT!?

Ah, it is in stasis, to the rear of the human and me.

My biomass needs have been somewhat met, and the human has

promised more food later.

Still.

Mmm…

I've reached a decision.

I will not eat the human! Its strange forms of offered biomass have been very interesting. I must wait to see what other forms of biomass and food it offers later.

More so, it reminds of Carl, and Doc. It's offered me biomass, like the wolfpack.

So, with my current needs being met, I look around the space myself and the human are occupying.

It is… small. I have to keep my tentacles confined, otherwise they cover the space. There were three soft structures, two of which me and the human are resting on, and the other behind us that the pup is in stasis on.

But the most interesting thing is… this structure is *fast.*

I look outside - glass structure allows me to do so -, to see trees and grass move by faster than I can process.

This structure is moving at a speed faster than my fastest anatomy can, and for a much longer time.

Ah, the human is communicating.

"-en meaning to ask, what's your name kid? Now that I'm not worried you'll die on me anytime soon."

I tilt my head. Confused.

"Name?"

"Yeah, your name."

Hmm…

The pack gave names to their members to identify their place in the pack, or because of their Core ability. They gave me one, but was that truly my name? Humans had been calling me X1 for a much longer time than the pack has called me Shape-Changer.

But I also don't like that I was named by humans. Even if this one is… friendly, the others have brought nothing but pain to my body and brain.

"... don't have a name." I say eventually.

The human looks at me from the corner of its eyes, before shrugging. "Ooookay. Well, no-name, we're almost at a good ol' Jodie's." The human falls into silence for a bit. "Mine's Joey, by the way. But yeh can call me Jay." Jay says, hands moving. Strange, the structure we're in turn one way, but our bodies try to continue moving in our previous direction.

The pup wakes, coming out of stasis, mewling for more biomass. I send a tentacle to it, sharing some of this… protein bar's biomass with it.

The structure stops, and I look outside of the glass to see an even larger structure, where more humans are sitting and eating.

HUNGRY! ATTEMPT TO CRAWL OUT OF THE WINDOW!

"Ah ah ah, not so fast kiddo." Joey says, grabbing one of my tentacles, and I glare at him.

Annoyed.

"I didn't wanna dress yeh all up, but yeh've gotta put at least some clothes on." Joey says, and I look between his body and mine.

Mmm…

His body has armor on it, while mine is just barely covered by a different kind of armor. Or maybe it's skin, based on how soft it is?

"I've got some pants for yeh here mate, put 'em on and we can go get some ungal and waffles." Joey communicates, offering me more skin.

I look at it, then at him.

“Oh, and put your tentacles away. That’ll scare most of the blokes in there right silly.”

Chapter 22: Mutie

A note from Sonkoso

On a side note, here's what I've learned about the american highway system.

It was originally pushed to congress, and enacted, as a national defense system. Essentially, having a long, interconnected highway system would allow troops to be transported quickly across the country, in the event that there was an invasion on US soil. It's managed by AASHTO (pretty much their whole deal is managing roads). Typically, highways that travel from north to south are given odd numbers, while those traveling from east to west are given even numbers. There are multiple exceptions, however. And it is still, to this day, considered america's largest infrastructure project, spanning nearly 40000 miles, and it was only just officially completed as of 2016. As requested, here is a link to learn more: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/interstate.cfm

Jodie's is a widely known all-day-breakfast and lunch diner, and is typically frequented by those who travel or live along the I-2. Known for its creative blends of local Stillera fauna with Earth recipes, since its founding in 11,023 PR it has become a brand favorite among Stilleran residents, human and nuan. The current CEO and founder of Jodie's, Jodie Springer, is half-nuan and half-human (American). Despite her age, and nearly four hundred operational locations, she still occasionally enjoys working at her original diner to this day, which resides in the sleepy town of Burstin, lying just shy of the halfway point between Sacison and Mackadon, two Pre-Arrival cities in Stillera.

The fact that this just happened to be one of the days she decided to work at her original diner, and just happened to fancy the afternoon shift, and *just* so *happened* to work as a waiter instead of a cook, allowed her to greet a familiar and a not so familiar face.

The bell on the front door chimed, as two figures stepped through.

One she recognized, a tall, hairy human with thick arms and an even thicker torso, and a gut that suggested he enjoyed his drinking. He was followed by a considerably smaller, well-featured human boy who couldn't have been older than fourteen, with shaggy hair and baggy pants cinched tight with a belt, the legs rolled up to stop them from dragging along the floor, complete with a red and black plaid button-up shirt identical to the one the man was wearing that was three sizes too big for him.

She suppressed a frown when she recognized clear signs of mutations on the boy. Wolf ears, and a bushy tail that wagged through a hole cut into the back of his pants while he sniffed the air, eyes roaming to rest on all of the patrons and their plates.

You're old enough to know better than to go believing in old superstitions, she chids herself as the pair approaches her.

"G'day Jodie." The burly man, Joey, greets politely, his voice thick with the accent of his homeland.

"Heya hun." She says, doing her best not to stare at the boys ears. "It's good to see you. Table for two?"

Joey nods, though from the look he's given her, she knows he's noticed her apprehension towards the boy. As well as the stillness that came over the diner as other patrons noticed the boy as well.

"I'll seat ya both to a booth in the back." She whispers, her voice hushed, and Joey nods appreciatively.

After leading them to a relatively quiet spot in the crowded diner, she passes two menus to them and takes out a notepad.

"What can I get ya to drink?" She asks, this time forcing herself to smile at the boy. He doesn't seem to notice, his face blank as he stares down at the menu in front of him.

"Two sweet teas, if yeh wouldn't mind." Joey says, and Jodie nods.

"Alright sugar, I'll be back in a few minutes to take your orders."

Jodie spins around, eying two of her staff as they nervously shift on

their feet, looking around the diner.

She gestures for one of them to follow her, and he does, hurriedly striding to her side and bending down so she can whisper in his ear.

“If Brias and Connel come, make sure they don’t see them.” She hisses in his ear, and her staff nods, hurriedly moving to give her orders to the other waitstaff in the diner.

She glanced back to look at the booth, and saw Joey pointing at the menu and explaining something to the boy. The boy looks between him and the menu, his head tilting in confusion. A normal scene, in her normal diner, but for some reason, she couldn’t shake the ominous feeling she had about how the afternoon would turn out.

“I recommend the ungal and waffles, but their starberry and snag pancakes are right fahkin tasty too.” Joey says, pointing to images on this… menu, in front of me.

Strange. The images look nothing like any biomass I’ve seen, and they have odd squiggles next to them.

I shift in my… seat, uncomfortable. Joey would not stop bothering me until I wore this strange, loose skin, and stored my tentacles inside of my body. Not having eyes to see in all directions, or tentacles to sense vibrations, is very unpleasant.

But I have to socialize with the humans here. Otherwise, they may attack me, like the other humans in the forest.

“Here you go sweet peas.” The human female that first greeted us returns to our location, holding two glass structures with dark fluid in them. She sets them down, then pulls out a structure similar to what the humans at home would use. “Are y’all ready to place your order?”

The female smells good. **Hungry.**

Maybe just a little bite would be okay?

“I’ll have some brekkie ungal and waffles.” Joey says, sliding his

menu over to the female. She nods, and taps her structures together. Then she turns to me. I can smell it on her.

The **fear** scent. But why?

“And you hun? What can I get for you?”

I point to one of the pictures that Joey was communicating about, and also push my menu to her.

“Alright, two orders of ungal and waffles. I’ll have those right out to you.” She says. As she bends down to take the menus, the **fear** scent grows stronger. Why is she afraid?

“Right mate, I’ve been tryin not to pry, but I’m fahkin curious. What were yeh out there in the woods for?” Joey says, as he holds the glass structure and drinks it.

I mimic his motion. It is important to copy behaviors, like I did with the wolf pack, until I ca-

DELICIOUS!

WHAT *IS* THIS!?

This fluid tastes amazing! Very sweet!

Wiggle.

“Mate? Yeh alright there?”

BE QUIET JOEY! I AM SAVORING THIS TASTE!

“Thanks doc.” I say, licking my lips. Disappointment. I’ve consumed all of the fluid. I look at Joey and his fluid, and he displays amusement before passing it over to me.

But before I take it, he pulls it back. FRUSTRATED! WHY OFFER IF YOU’RE NOT GOING TO GIVE?

“Listen kiddo, yeh don’t look to be in a good ways. I just need yeh to answer some questions, and I’ll give yeh as much food as yeh want.”

He says, shaking the glass.

“Answer some questions.” I repeat, and he snorts in amusement, handing me the glass.

SO! GOOD!

“Why were yeh in the forest?”

The fluid is gone again. I look at Joey, and tilt my head.

“Home.” I answer, then look around. Is there any more of this fluid? It has a miniscule amount of biomass, but it is still more than water.

“Alright. Where is your home in the forest?”

Tilt my head again. I try to remember my home. I’d not really paid attention to what the outside of it looked like, or where it was. I was too focused on escaping from the predator. But I remember it being like the den, sheltered from the sun. “Underneath the ground.” I say, finally.

Joey nods his head again. “And your parents? Where are your parents?”

Confused.

“Parents?”

Now Joey seems confused. “Yeah, your parents. People who take care of yeh? Gave birth to yeh?”

Ah, realization. He’s asking about the Creator.

“Do not know. They left.” I say, honestly. None of the bodies in my home belonged to the Creator or the humans that were always around them.

Joey’s face twists. Interesting expression. Disapproval? Anger? He opens his mouth, but the female has returned.

“Here you are darlin’s. I’ll go ahead and get y’all some more tea, and

you just let me know if y'all need anything else." The female says, placing real versions of the images in front of us, and then pouring some fluid - tea - into our glasses.

"Thank yeh." Joey says, and she leaves.

Sniff.

Ssp.

I wipe away saliva from the corner of my mouth, and look at Joey.

He shows another amused expression. "Go ahead, I'll ask more questions after you're done eating."

YES! "Thanks Doc!"

SO!

GOOD!

This is what humans eat every day!? It's so rich in biomass, despite being so small!

Strange though, these are definitely new structures, but I'm not gaining any new information from them. Will have to think about it later.

For now… **devour.**

"Well look at that, the Mutie eating like the savage it is." I hear a new voice communicate close to my right.

Look, to inspect.

Joey is stiff, can sense anger. The **fear** scent in this place has grown stronger.

Mmm… two nuans. I remember gaining their structure shortly after gaining the human anatomy, but I never tested it. Seemed too similar to the human anatomy to be worth the biomass it would take to study its functions.

The two nuans are displaying aggressive behaviors.

Can smell the **fear** on them, and I recognize the emotion in their eyes.

Hatred.

Why do things hate me even though we've never met? It seems illogical.

"Brias, Connel, don't you boys have better things to do than bother my patrons?" The female from before speaks up, stepping between us and the nuans.

The hatred doesn't diminish. "Jodie, what in the Rift are you thinking, serving food to a *Mutie*." One of the nuans spits, snarling at me.

Unpleasant.

Growl.

The **fear** is everywhere now, as all of the humans and nuans in the diner heard me.

Good. Intimidation tactic was successful.

The woman swallows, staring at me with wide eyes, but she turns back to the two. "I will *not* have either of you, or *anyone*," she says to all the people watching, "tell me who can and cannot eat at my diners. Mutants are just people, same as all of us."

The taller nuan steps forward. I've decided.

If it attacks, I'll eat it.

"Your time in the city changed you Jodie, those fuckers don't dese-"

"How's about we all calm down now, yeah?" Joey says, standing up. The two nuans eyes widen.

Joey is big. Being big is intimidation on its own.

“Yeh cunts are botherin me and my mate here. Bugger off, would yehs?” He murmurs, his voice quiet.

The two nuans look between Joey, Jodie, and me, before spitting again and walking out of the diner.

Mmm…

I will have to add quiet intimidation to my tactics.

Joey sighs, sitting back down. Happy. I continue to **devour.**

“Sorry about that Jodie, didn’t mean to cause yeh trouble.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about them. But I’d have your semi checked before you head out, just in case they’ve slashed your tires. Bad thing about a small town is everyone knows who the stranger’s car is.”

Mmm… done.

That food was rich in biomass, but still… **hungry.**

I hold my plate up to Joey and Jodie. “More?” I ask, tilting my head.

Jodie makes amusement sound. “Sure hun. It’ll be on the house. Same thing?”

I nod. But I'm confused. “But I want it here. Not on a… house.” I clarify, and she gives another amused sound.

“Your friend’s interesting, I’ll give you that Joe.”

Chapter 23: What Happens at Oscar's Stays at Oscar's

“You got lucky!” A young, boyish voice exclaims grumpily, and is met with mirth filled giggling. The video pans from its view of a lake to center on a male youth, no older than sixteen. He’s panting, glaring at the person holding the phone and recording him.

“Yeah, lucky that you’re so slow.” Another voice, young and girlish, replies teasingly. The boy rolls his eyes, taking a deep breath and resting against a tree. He has hiking gear on, complete with a large ruck pack, light cargo pants and a short sleeve shirt.

“Can’t believe you wanted to race on a hiking trip.” He grumbles. “We’ve still got six miles to go, and my pack is killing me.”

“You’re just mad that you lost.” The girl says, and the boy rolls his eyes again.

“Whatever. Next time I’ll-” Suddenly he pauses, eyes widening as he stares past her. “What the hell is that!?”

The video hurriedly spins around in a whirl of green and brown, peering deeper into the hiking trail ahead of the holder.

“What? I don’t see any-” The girl yelps as the video is yanked back.

“Ha! Got you. You’ve got to stop falling for that, it’s the oldest trick in the book.” The boy hoots in triumph, and the video settles on his grinning face.

The girl holding the phone slaps him lightly on the chest. “Don’t do that! You know I hate it.”

“Oh don’t be mad. Come on, gimme a kiss.”

*“Ugh, I hate you **so** much.”*

The phone is lowered, then immediately raised, the video distorting as it attempts to focus on something farther down the trail from where they had come.

*“What the **hell** is that?” The girl whispers, as the distortion grows more severe.*

“Oh ha-ha. You think you can pull the ‘oh, I’m going to act like there really is something there, and he’ll have to believe it because he knows I know he wouldn’t fall for it right after he did it unless it was real’ card? Amateur. I’m three steps ahead and always will be babe.”

“No, Brian, really, there’s something down there.” She insists. The video is now almost unwatchable, pixels blending together to form a headache-inducing kaleidoscope of color.

“Fine, I’ll play along, bu- holy fuck.”

The video slowly returns to normal, revealing a shimmering haze in the air, light bending and revolving around a specific point. A tiny pin-prick of darkness hovers in the middle of this seemingly reality warping area.

“You thi-”

Brian is interrupted by voices chanting, low and indistinct, growing louder and louder as the black dot expands. The video has distorted again, far worse than before. And then the darkness explodes outwards, covering the recording, the screams from the two hikers being joined by the screams of dozens, hundreds, thousands of other voices, but these are unearthly, inhuman, and disturbing.

-End of what is believed to be the first recorded Rift Expansion Event on Earth.

Joey sighs, as he inspects his very fast movement structure.

“Yeah, they slashed a few of our tires.” He grumbles.

“Bad?” I ask, and he nods.

“Bad.” He confirms. “I’ll have to call a local fellah I know, have him take it in. Get your pup out of the truck first.”

I nod, and fiddle with the structure that opens into the truck. Immediately the pup jumps out.

“Hungry?” I ask, and it *yips*, burrowing its face into my chest. I feed it with a small tentacle, as Joey taps a circular structure around his neck. Now that I’m aware of it, I remember a lot of the humans and nuans around here carry one. Will have to question Joey about it later.

“Yeah mate, it’s Joey. Not so bad, yourself? Good, good. Listen mate, some local cunts slashed my tires, I was wondering if yeh’d be able to give it a look? Nah, not my own, company semi. Yep, probably’ll need the big one. Great, ‘preciate yeh mate, we’re just outside of Jodie’s. Oh yeah, she’s workin’ today, yeh know the old bird. Fantastic, see yeh.”

The pup has finished eating, and it crawls up to rest on my shoulder, sniffing my hair as Joey comes back.

“Alright, me mate will be here in five.” He says, reaching out a ha-

Growl.

“Right, sorry ‘bout that kiddo, forgot yeh didn’t like being touched.” He says, his tone sorry.

“Unpleasant.”

“Gotcha. Was just gonna say there’s some shade over there, so we’re not standing out in the heat.” He points to the side of the truck, but I shake my head.

“The heat is pleasant.” It increases blood circulation just slightly, reducing the biomass cost of maintaining my anatomy. He nods.

We wait for three hundred breaths, before another truck pulls up next to us. Another hairy human male leans out of its side.

“This the beaut?” It calls, and Joey nods.

“Yeh, this is her. Appreciate yeh coming out here.” Joey says, and I pause.

Strange. There's no underlying hostilities or unease to his tone, like when the wolf pack is among their… friends. Is this new arrival a friend? Is that what a 'mate' is? But Joey calls everyone a 'mate'.

I'm confused. Another thing to inquire about.

"No problem Joe. You both hop on in, I'll get you sorted out." The new male says, and I follow Joey, climbing into the big truck.

Mmm…

These seats are much more pleasant than Joey's truck.

"And then, if yeh can believe it, they had the nerve to imply Jodie had gone soft in the city. Jodie! Soft!" Joey laughs, ruefully shaking his head as he takes another swig of his beer.

Oscar rolled his eyes, popping open another can and kicking his feet up on a stool. They were sitting out on his porch, idly watching Non-name - as Joey had affectionately taken to calling him - looking at the porch light with fascination. He was flicking the switch up and down, watching it turn on and off. The pup he always had with him was resting in a makeshift pouch the kid had made with his shirt, wriggling in deeper to escape the flickering light.

Suddenly his head swiveled around to stare at them, wonderment in his gaze.

He pointed up at the moon, then at the light switch.

"How you start that light?" He asked, his soft voice brimming with curiosity.

This caused Joey and Oscar to chuckle. "Nah kiddo, that light always stays on." Joey informs him, and No-name nods, accepting the answer and resuming flicking the light switch.

Oscar looks between the kid and Joey, not missing the hint of fatherly care in his gaze. He recalls that Joey's son, Gaster, should be about No-name age.

“Been meaning to ask you.” Oscar whispers, leaning towards Joey. “Where’d you find the kid? And why’s he so… him?”

Joey purses his lips, as if trying to find the right answer. Finally, he whispers back. “Hit ‘em with my truck, actually, on my route to Mackadon.” Oscar’s eyes widened in alarm, and Joey waved his beer. “I know, I know. But look at ‘em. Whatever his mutation is, it’s made ‘em able to nap off a hit from a semi.”

Oscar nods thoughtfully. “Where’s his parents? They must be worried sick.”

At this Joey scowls, taking a deep swig of his beer. “I dunno about that one mate. The kid was living in a forest, a fahkin classified one at that, alone for who knows how long. He was naked when I bumped into ‘em,” Oscar snorts at his phrasing, and Joey flips him off, “and when he woke up he looked like he was ready to eat me.”

No-name seems to have grown bored of the light, and a tentacle slithers out from underneath his shirt to wrap around three hot dogs resting on a plate, bringing them to his mouth. He wiggles from side to side, eyes closed as he chews on the hot dogs.

They both look at him, concern in their eyes.

“I’m thinking his parents were fahkin nutters. Probably abused ‘em, or abandoned ‘em once he mutated. It’s not exactly a subtle one.” Joey murmured, and Oscar sighed.

“So what’s the play there, Joe?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. I’ll probably take ‘em back to Sacison. Yeh said the truck’s not going to be ready ‘til tomorrow morning anyway, yeah?” A nod from Oscar. “Might as well then. I’ll see if CPS will be able to take care of ‘em.”

“Well, I wish you luck with that one brother.” Oscar says, raising his can to Joe’s and tapping it. They both take a drink, then a smile breaks out across his face. “Yo kid, you want to try a beer?”

A grin breaks out across Joey’s face as well, as No-name’s head snaps up. He hesitantly shuffles towards them. “A beer? Is beer biomass?”

He inquires, his quiet voice barely audible.

Oscar hands over his can. “If by biomass, you mean does it have calories, then yes.” He says, and No-name practically snatches it from his hands. He sniffs it, then to their shock drains the entire can in one large gulp.

His face screws up in disgust, causing the two older men to break out into laughter. No-name then throws the can on the ground and crushes it with his foot, causing them to laugh harder.

“WHAT IS THIS FLUID!? HOW DO THEY MAKE BIOMASS TASTE BAD!?” He cries angrily, and Oscar cracks open another beer, shoulders still shaking.

“Give it a few years bud, you might like it then.” He chuckles.

Having lightened the mood, Joey and Oscar settle back into the easy conversation of two friends catching up after not seeing each other in a long time. More beers are drained, until the comforting cloudiness of thought tingles lightly in their minds, and their speech slurs just slightly.

“And then!” Joey says, hands emphasizing his words in large, exaggerated arcs. “Gasty tells me this kid, this little fahkin kid - Sariel, I’ve told yeh about her, she’s Gasty’s mate - makes the cunt who’d been pickin on ‘em piss herself.”

Oscar grinned, feeling almost as satisfied as he knew Joey must be. “Good on her. How is your wife, by the way? I haven’t spoken to Brooke in years.”

The smile on Joey’s face falters just the slightest bit. “Oh, uh… actually, we-”

What he’s about to say is cut off by a ear-piercing, blood curdling scream that bounces off of the walls between Oscar’s house and his shop, rolling down the highway they reside on. Instantly both men sit up, frantically scanning the area around them. But they can’t find who they were both instinctively searching for.

“Where is-”

There's more screaming, coming from at least five different sources, all behind Oscar's garage, and they explode out of their seats, sprinting down the steps of his porch and rushing to find the source of the screams.They round the corner of Oscar's garage, and-

Freeze.

"What in the fahkin…" Joey trails off, the sight in front of him too much to continue.

In the pale moonlight, their eyes still struggling to adjust to the relative darkness compared to the porch, they see a mass of writhing, roiling darkness and five people desperately stabbing at it with glinting metal objects. It wraps around each of them as they scream, thrashing their bodies against the walls of the building or the pavement of the highway. The lucky ones go limp immediately. The unlucky ones still struggle, and Oscar and Joey watch on in collective horror as more tentacles wrap around those wildly struggling forms, ripping off limbs and then throwing the remaining torsos into the air. What look to be white spikes streak through the air and riddle their bodies on the way back down, and the mass of tentacles welcome them into their fold.

Suddenly one of the figures manages to break free, severing the tentacles around them and limping towards the pair. They subconsciously recoil, as if terrified of drawing that *thing's* attention to themselves.

"Help me!" The figure pleads, tripping over himself and landing face first just in front of them. It looks up, crawling towards them, and Joey trembles as he realizes he recognizes the face staring up at him. One of the nuans who had confronted them at the diner. "Oh Makers, please help meEEEE**EEE**!"

A tentacle wraps around his leg and drags him screaming back into the darkness, where his cries are cut short. After a few moments, the only sounds left are a disturbing cacophony of *cracking* and *snapping* bone, wet squelching meat, and the mews and whimpers of a hungry puppy.

The pair stand frozen, paralyzed by fear, as the mass of tentacles

subsides and are contracted to reveal a young boy, who approaches them step by step. Finally, No-name steps into the light, slick blood on his baggy clothes and around his mouth. He has a wide smile on his face, revealing pearly white teeth as he looks at them happily, to their absolute horror.

Then, they finally notice the rapidly healing stab wounds and lacerations that covered his body, flesh knitting itself closed at unbelievable speed.

“Thanks Doc!” No-name says, and burps loudly.

Chapter 24: Nursery Rhymes

A note from Sonkoso

Heya, I recommend listening to this song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71jLhB1nRaw when you reach a 'The woman snaps awake'

"I fucking hate the desert." Margaret complained loudly, her boots plodding against fine sand as her combat suit automatically adjusted her balance for the constantly shifting terrain. There was a round of chorused agreement, every member of my team groaning with her as we trekked onwards.

"What even was our mission, again?" Baron called from the back, and I forced down the flash of annoyance that flared inside of my chest. This was the *third* time I'd have to explain it.

"There was a spike in hera radiation recorded in the area." I snapped. Honestly, if they had just read the logs before the start of the mission… I forced myself not to stomp my foot in annoyance. Both Dad *and* grandpa had said any good leader would control her emotions. "We're to scout ahead, report if we see any signs of Rift Expansion. If there are, we're to set up a classification zone and report it to RCO. If not, eliminate the entity that's releasing hera radiation and call it a day."

There's a collective groan from the group again. Come on guys, we like, *volunteered* for this!

"I hope it's not a Rift..." Gaster murmurs from the middle. We all turn to him, and he immediately shrinks in on himself, his helmet closing around his face while his large frame draws inwards. I roll my eyes, and turn back to the front.

Gaster, always so unsure of himself. If he would just…

Wait. Three large sentient creatures just entered my passive psionic field.

“Contact!” I called, drawing my phase sword and focusing my attention on the vibrations beneath my feet. “Three psio sigs underground, two hundred meters and closing!” My team all nodded, raising rifles or phase swords and preparing for contact. I sensed limited intelligence coming from the psionic signatures, mostly hunger and the sensations of tremors in the ground where my team walked.

Our form fitting black power armor begins to glow as it activates its camouflaging feature, bending light to make all of us nearly imperceptible to sight and constructing a helmet around our faces. My vision is immediately overlapped with thermal and electroreceptive sensors, but I screw my eyes shut to concentrate, sending my mind outwards in a psionic pulse.

I focused, ignoring the sun that was scorching my skin through the cracks in my damaged power armor, the sand dunes subtly shifting underneath my weight, the sweat that beaded up in an attempt to cool me off only to evaporate as soon as it formed. I pushed all of it out of my mind, all to focus on the three sigs that were quickly approaching us, reading their intent, their animalistic intelligence that quickly calculated who the weakest target was among our group.

My eyes snapped open, and I spun around. “GASTER, MOVE YOUR ASS!” I screamed, and I saw his bulky form turn towards me. I can pinpoint the exact moment he realizes what I mean. Second by torturous second, his feet shift in an attempt to propel him sideways.

Too slow.

The sand underneath him erupts upwards as a wurm engulfed him, power armor and all. One moment he’s there, and the next a towering ten meter long wurm is sailing through the air where he was, showering sand down on all of us.

“GASTER!” I’LL *FUCKING KILL THAT THING!*

FOCUS ALL OF MY PSIONIC POWER ON THAT UGLY FUCKING BEAST, AND RAKE AT IT WITH MY MIND!

The wurm writhes in the air, staying above ground for a few precious

seconds, and we all swarm it. Gunfire erupts, energy and material bullets slamming into the carapace of the wurm. Its peach colored armor blended in with the sand, making it look like we were attacking a small dune instead of a living thing.

I stabbed my phaser into it, the blade vibrating as soon as it made contact with flesh and cutting it at the cellular level.

This is for Gaster, you overgrown earthworm!

I dash along its side, splitting open the carapace and spilling its internal organs down the desert sand. The wurm remains eerily soundless, even as it's thrashing stops and it grows still. I sense the other two sigs rapidly approaching, moving directly under-

"MARGARET, SAMPSON, DODGE!" I scream, and they hurriedly follow my order, black body armor propelling them to the side as two more wurms erupt out of the sand. They've narrowly avoided being swallowed like Gaster was. I can't sense his psionic signature anymore, and judging by the rows and rows of jagged teeth I can see down the wurms' throats as they wave around in the air, I know why.

I fucking *hate* wurms.

"OPEN FIRE!"

More physical rounds are fired, cracking open carapace, while the energy rounds roast the soft flesh inside. I latch on to their minds, my core burning in my chest as I rapidly expend energy to send sensation after sensation of feeblement into their minds, ensuring they can't escape.

That'll teach thos-

OH MY GOD IT FUCKING *HURTS*!

Shock floods my system, numbing the pain for a few moments, and I look down to see a scythe that has pierced through my chest.

HOLY SHIT UNGAL FUCKING CUNT WHAT THE FU-

-

I gasp awake, clawing at my chest. HAVE TO SAVE MY TEAM! HAVE TO-

“It’s okay.” Someone says to my right, and I turn to look at them. My heart’s racing, and I can feel my clothes sticking to my body with the sweat that’s soaked them. The person who spoke was…

Gaster!?

He gives me that stupid smile of his that makes my heart flutter, his huge hand resting on my shoulder, and he pushes his glasses up on his stupid, chubby, cute face, complimented by his stupid, clear, chocolate brown skin.

“How are you…” Oh. Wait a second. Fucking *ow!* I rub my temples as a headache forms, information flooding into my brain.

“Yep, there it is. Hit me just as hard.” Gaster says soothingly, just the barest hint of that cute accent his dad had in his deep voice. Ugh.

I brush his hand off, looking around and seeing the rest of my team… my *friends*, laying on cushioned chairs, their circlets connected to the neurolink around their forehead.

That’s right. We were in a sim room, paid for by the Academy. White, anesthetic lights, cushioned neurolink sim pods, and big screen monitors next to each of the sim pods depicting different angles of each person in the simulation.

I looked at one of the monitors by my side, which had a wide angled view of my team as they desperately fought against the two entities that had made an appearance right after the wurms.

I looked accusingly at Gaster, as he watched the footage along with me.

“You were the first one out.” I said, and he turned his head away sheepishly.

“I told yeh, I wasn’t supposed to be here.” He says, and I immediately felt bad. He didn’t have a core, mutated or natural. The only reason he was here was because he was my friend.

Then I felt angry for feeling bad. “You still said you had been in a sim pod before!” I snapped, and he shrank in on himself even more.

“Yeah…” He muttered, casting his eyes to the ground. “For BF. I didn’t think you guys were, you know, training. I thought it was just for fun.”

GAH! STOP MAKING ME FEEL BAD!

Suddenly I hear a gasp, and a familiar figure frantically sits up, scrabbling at his chest. I turn to the screen just in time to see his in-sim avatar stabbed through with a scythed tentacle, two dark figures working their way through our team in the simulation.

“It was just a simulation.” I call out from my own pod, Baron’s already pale skin turned even more pale with the shock of death. He looks at me, light blue eyes wide, and I gesture to the screen on our sides.

“Oh thank god.” He breathes in relief, shaking.

I look from him, to the figures carefully picking at our team’s broken formation. They’re pretty strange looking, with two tentacles that end in a scythe, yellow eyes, and constantly shifting skin. They blink in and out of existence, disappearing from one spot to reappear in another.

“What are those things?” I ask, turning back to Baron. As our Rift expert, he should have at least some idea.

He also looks at the screen, before shrugging. “I dunno. Stalkers, maybe? I know Androtech was experimenting with Rift entities that masked themselves from perception.” I frowned, and he seemed to notice, because he clarified shortly after. “Not visible light, but reality perception. As in they become totally invisible to reality itself. Cat 4.”

I nod, and turn to Gaster. His lips are pursed, as he studies the screen.

“We were missing a regroup point in the event of a third party.” He mutters under his breath. “Should probably…” His eyes flick to me, and he turns his head away, embarrassed.

Which causes me to blush.

God damnit. Alright, enough of Gaster.

I unhook my circlet from my sim pod, feeling my shoulders *pop* and my back *crack* as I stretch out, swinging my feet to rest on the warm floors of the sim room.

There’s another desperate gasp for air, and Raimey sits up, looking at all of us in bewilderment.

“Simulation.” We all call out in unison, and his eyes lighten in understanding.

“God bless Stillera, I thought I’d be able to recognize it.” He grumbles, catching his breath.

We all sit in silence, watching the last of our team members, Margaret, fight against all of the odds. She’s performing well, dodging out of the way of two heavily injured wurms, and riding the edge of the stalker’s range, picking up our dropped ammunition and unloading it into the entities. She drops one wurm, then a stalker, and another wurm. For just a moment we believe she might be able to do it, but a scythe catches her in her heel before she can fully move out of the way and she goes down. She fires a few rounds into the stalker’s direction, but it’s too late. Another tentacle erupts out of the sand just in front of her, and she drops.

Margaret is in tears when she wakes up, sobbing in relief when she realizes we’re all still alive. She sobs harder when we reassure her it was just a sim.

After our team settles down, we all review our logs and replay the sim feed, trying to pinpoint where it all went wrong.

“I… got a little too emotional when one of our team members went down.” I acknowledged, glancing at Gaster. He didn’t seem to notice what I meant, just nodding as he followed along his own notes.

But Baron noticed, and he smirked.

"Don't you say a fucking thing." I snapped at him mentally, and he rolled his eyes but let it pass.

"I focused too much on keeping the wurms in place with a psionic assault, and missed the other two Rift entities that were in the area as a result. I'll chalk this one up as my fault."

The rest of the group begins to protest, but I hold up my hand. As the only one in the room with a natural core, I held seniority. "No, really. This one was my bad."

They grumble among themselves, but accept the verdict. Good. A leader should always take responsibility.

"Let's run it again!" Margaret suggests, her sea-green eyes flaring with determination, and a round of chorused agreement follows her. I glance at Gaster, and smile when I see a look of determination on his face. Alright, since everyone wants one more. I hope I sound more confident than I feel. Seeing them die… rattled me.

"Alright, the Academy has booked our Androtech sim room for the day, so one more time shouldn't hurt. Same scenario, same mission. Let's get to work."

-

The woman snaps awake, the haze that had clouded her mind clearing as she returns to consciousness.

The last thing she had remembered was walking around a shopping mall with her friends on her day off from work, and then feeling the distinct urge to follow a man into a side shop for some reason. She looks around wildly, straining to lift her body up before finally realizing that her mouth is gagged and her limbs are bound.

She notices a lamp in the corner, its flickering flame causing shadows to dance along the bricked walls of her prison. The shockingly awful

smell and the sound of flowing water immediately reminds her of a sewer system.

A soft, off-key humming to the tune of ‘London Bridge is Falling Down’ echoes throughout sewer cavernous room she's in, as a figure clad in a dirty, patchwork lab coat with ‘Androtech Research Head’ labeled on the back carefully selects their instruments, wiping them with a dirty cloth.

The woman with disheveled hair and torn clothing, arms and legs bound to a surgical table, stares at the figure in abject terror. Her own muffled cries around the gag in her mouth mingle with the softly hummed tune, creating a horrifying, off sync harmony.

The figure pauses, turning to them with a bright smile.

“Ah, you’ve finally regained consciousness. I was wondering when you would.” He murmurs, before turning back to the various surgical instruments at his side. She strains her head to see what he has beside him, and when she does her body grows ice cold with dread. Besides scalpels, forceps, and scissors, he has various pieces of pulsing… somethings, lining the table. They loosely resemble organs of some kind, but they’re just the right kind of wrong to call them such. Pulsing at just the wrong time, nearly pitch black instead of flesh colored, and too small or too large to be correct.

She watches as the figure, his face hidden behind a surgical mask and his body obscured by his patchwork coat, gingerly picks up one of the organs and brings it to his tray of instruments.

“Tell me,” He says, his voice lilting but cracked, peaking and softening at random, “do you know my favorite thing about nursery rhymes?”

Ah, she thinks to herself, *he’s crazy.*

A tear slips past her cheek, even as she continues crying out desperately around her gag.

He holds up a scalpel, slicing the organ open. What look to be miniature tentacles spill out of it, as he peels it open even wider and

grabs another organ.

“My favorite thing about nursery rhymes,” He continues in that strange, lilting tone, “is that they all depict horrific, historic events in the most soothing way possible. They’re made for children to understand, after all. Tragedies, wrapped up in a little present for children to sing to their fellows. Warning them about history in a way they can comprehend.”

His glasses flash in the lamplight as he turns to her, a wide smile on his face. “But all of those events were important foundations in the history of humans on earth. A structural weakness that allowed a kingdom to be conquered. A plague that wiped out half of a continent, to be wary of.”

He places the organs next to her, gently, and her breathing speeds up as he rests a scalpel against her skin, the metal cool and sharp.

“I’m going to help you ascend.” He whispers conspiratorially, the piercing blue eyes behind his glasses fervent with madness. “I’m going to allow you to commune with the Great One, as I have.” He shivers in delight, his eyes gaining a faraway look.

“I was just like you. Frightened, uncomprehending of the gift of understanding They brought to me. But don’t worry.” He leans in, his lips pressing against her ear. “You’ll learn, when you are brought closer to Their image. And soon, our society will teach children nursery rhymes about *you.* Another important event in our history." He leans away, adjusting his glasses. "The first to reach ascension.”

She screams, as the scalpel pierces her flesh. And the man continues humming.

Chapter 25: Worse Than He Had Thought

Joey has been silent for a long time now. It is strange, considering his usual behavior.

He hasn't communicated anything with me since my previous awake cycle, except for telling me it was time to get into our fixed truck when I came out of stasis.

Deviation in normal behavior patterns is not a good thing. I remember Doc saying that, almost three moons ago.

The pup is laying on my legs, and I groom it with my hand. It soothes this anatomy, a similarity it shares with the wolf anatomy.

My brain is becoming more and more active, processing things much faster with the recently increased amounts of biomass. Humans are very proficient in adding biomass to *everything*. They've even found a way to add it to water!

"More protein bar?" I ask, hesitant, and Joey sighs as he pulls two more out of the truck. It seems to hold an endless supply of them. Happy!

Eat.

Still delicious.

Wiggle.

"I don't fahkin get it." Joey speaks, and I turn to look at him. He's still not looking at me, staring straight at the… road, he called it, his head resting against his hand. Through the hair on his face I see a frown. I've learned that that's a general human sign of displeasure.

I tilt my head, confused. His eyes look at me for a breath, before returning to the front.

"How the hell do yeh act like that, when yeh..." He stops, letting out another sigh. That's also a display of displeasure.

Hmm…

Now that I think of it, both he and Oscar were acting differently around me when I returned from dealing with the snacks. I'd informed them that through a psionic link I'd learned they were attempting to assault Oscar's home, *COWARDLY* hoping that we had entered stasises. But that didn't seem to change their reaction.

Develop the Songbird syrinx. They found it humorous when I copied their voices before.

"When yeh...?" I repeat, but instead of laughing Joey releases… a fear scent?

"Don't fahkin do that!" He snaps, and I deflate.

"Sorry." I say, removing the syrinx.

"Ah, don't be… ah fahkin Rift." Joey replies, roughly scratching his face hair. "Just… tell me why." His eyes shift to me again. "Why'd yeh kill 'em? Why'd yeh… *eat* 'em?"

I tilt my head, confused.

Is killing aggressors to remove threats not what humans do? Or…

Ah.

I remember!

Mind-Walker also exhibited discomfort when I ate her kin. Perhaps that is the cause? But why? It seems inefficient to leave behind biomass, even if it is kin biomass.

"Well?" Joey's tone grows impatient.

"I killed them because they attacked me." I reply. "With their detachable metal claws."

Joey sighs. He seems… relieved? But it doesn't last. His posture stiffens again. "Yeh, alright, fine. Self defense, I can get that. Not hard to imagine what they were doin' outside of me mate's garage at

night, with weapons. But what yeh did wasn't… that." Joey shifts in his seat, and a shiver goes through him. Another fear scent. "Yeh bloody tore 'em apart, kiddo. And *ate* 'em. I still can't understand why yeh did that."

Mmm…

Annoyance. And confused.

"Why wouldn't I eat them?" I ask instead, studying him, and his head whips around to me.

"WHAT DO YEH FAHKIN MEAN, WHY WOULDN'T Y- AH SHIT!"

The truck JERKS TO THE SIDE, THROWING MY BODY AGAINST THE DOOR! GAH!

Joey turns the circle structure in front of him, the… wheel, he had called it - which was strange, because what the truck used for movement were also wheels I'll have to clarify the difference later - until the truck is no longer moving erratically. Joey's breaths are heavy, his fingers tight around the wheel.

The pup whimpers, nuzzling closer against my body. Strange. The urge to protect the pup has grown stronger, in the past day. Perhaps because I've been feeding it biomass? It would be a waste for it to die.

"Kiddo, yeh can't eat people." Joey snaps, and I turn to look at him. He's frowning again, another sign of displeasure.

I'm confused again.

"Why? It would be a waste." I ask. What is it about being kin with something that causes an aversion to eating them?

He looks at me again, mouth open and eyes wide. I recognize this expression too! Surprise!

"Because they're *people.*" He states, clearly confused. "Like you and me. What kind of folks did yeh have that makes yeh think eating people is okay?"

I tilt my head again.

Hmm…

Folks means parents, which means Doc. “The Creator always made me fight my other kin. They were tests. If I didn’t kill my kin, or other creatures they tested me against, I was not fed biomass, and was shocked with poking instruments. It was… unpleasant.”

Joey grows very still, and the truck slows down until it stops. I look around, hopeful. Normally when the truck stops, it means other buildings where food is kept are around.

But there’s nothing. I turn to look at Joey, and see he’s staring at me.

“Say that again?” He says, but his voice is very quiet. Ohhh, the quiet intimidation. It does not work on me, but I comply.

“I had to test to earn biomass.” I tilt my head as his mouth opens. “Is that not normal? I thought all humans did this.”

He continues to stare at me, and I shift. His gaze is unpleasant.

“Joey?”

“... my god.”

It was worse than he had thought, Joey realized.

Much worse.

The kiddo hadn’t been abused, or abandoned. He had been *experimented* on. For as long as he could remember.

He glanced to the side, where No-name had fallen asleep with his pup curled up in his lap. They were nearing Sacison now, with the sun still just barely clinging to the sky as the moon was beginning to rise, while Joey replayed the conversation he’d had with him as they continued the drive.

From what he had been able to gather from the conversation, No-

name - he fahkin refused to call him what those *monsters* had named him, especially since the kiddo also didn't seem to like being called that - was born and raised in some sort of lab out in the woods. Now, he was perfectly aware that he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. But whatever was going on, he knew it was *definitely* illegal. And *definitely* couldn't be talked about. Crazy scientists conducting experiments on children in the middle of nowhere? Yeah, he'd read enough conspiracy theories to know that discussing that with local authorities would have him dead in an 'unfortunate trucking accident'. Or maybe from a heart attack. Or a suicide that involved three bullets in the back of his head.

Yeah, no. Not on his to-do list.

"Fahkin hell." Joey mutters under his breath. He glanced over at No-name, the fear he'd had towards him completely washed away by the fear of what would be done *to* No-name if those sickos ever found him again.

The second thing he'd been able to gather was that something had happened in the lab. The 'loud' that No-name had been talking about when he first woke up was probably an alarm. And it all clicked in to place.

The police that had closed off the woods? Containment. *Something* had escaped from there, probably the 'predator' he mentioned running away from. For some reason No-name refused to talk about anything that happened after his escape, but judging from the random pup he had, Joey could only assume the kid had been living in the woods for god knows how long.

Right now Joey was only grateful that he'd run the kid over with his truck. That had probably, ironically, saved his life. The only problem was, Joey didn't know what to do with him now.

He could continue with his original plan. Drop him off with CPS and hope for the best, but that was suddenly sounding like an awful idea. But he didn't know what else to do…

Ah fahkin shit. The idea wasn't a terrible one. But… it would mean a very long talk with Brooke.

More on that later, he still had another few hours before he was back in the city, and he needed sleep. He hadn't been able to get any after the… incident with no-name in Burstin. But before that, he had to make a call.

"Joey!" Oscar's voice hissed through his transceiver. "You're alive! Is that… *thing* still with you? I still can't believe you decided to keep with i-"

"I'm fine, mate." Joey interrupted, the exhaustion creeping into his voice. "And No-name's not a thing. He's just a kid, with some apparently really heavy baggage."

Oscar made some sort of strangled squeaking sound of disbelief. "You *saw* what he did to those people, Joe! I've still got half a mind to report it to the police. Who knows when he'll-"

"No!" Joey hurriedly interrupted, then glanced over to the kid. He breathed in relief when he saw that No-name was still asleep. "No, whatever yeh do, that is definitely not it."

Oscar paused, his panic settling as he recognized the grim tone in his friend's voice.

"... alright, what's up?"

Joey pinched the bridge of his nose, slowing his truck to a stop and pulling over to the side of the road. The next town was still an hour's ride out, and he didn't think he'd be able to make it.

He let out a deep breath. Where to fahkin start, eh?

"Alright, so first thing's first. What yeh saw? Forget it. It never happened. And whatever you do, do *not* go to the boys in blue." Oscar gave a disbelieving scoff.

"Joe, I don't think I'm ever going to forget it for the rest of my life. The way he…" Joey heard gagging over the phone, and winced in sympathy.

"I know mate, trust me, I know. But… It's bad, mate. Really bad."

“Worse than…?”

“Much worse. So… turns out that…”

Joey spends the next ten minutes explaining what he’d been able to piece together, his voice hushed as he sends occasional glances over to No-name, making sure he was still sleeping.

Oscar, for the most part, remains deathly quiet. Finally, when Joey finishes talking, he gives a long, breathy sigh.

“Shit.” He says simply.

“Shit.” Joey agrees, and they sit in silence for a few moments longer.

“Well… now I almost feel bad for locking him outside of my house.” Oscar murmurs, which wins a wry chuckle out of Joey.

“Nah mate, that was a perfectly reasonable reaction. If I’d had my gun on me, instead of in the truck, I’d have probably tried shooting ‘em.” He says.

“Alright, well… shit. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Yeh don’t have to say anything. Just don’t report what yeh saw, alright? Last thing we need are blue boys looking for ‘em.”

Oscar gives another soft sigh. “They’re going to be looking for you two anyways.” He warns. “The entire town’s been talking about a mutant kid passing through, and how Jodie practically chased Brias and Connel out of the diner to stop them from harassing the kid. You know how small towns are.”

This time it was Joey’s turn to sigh. “Yeah, I know.” He agrees reluctantly. “Just… if they come around questioning yeh about it, only tell ‘em what happened before… that. There’s not any evidence, is there?”

“No. Nothing. The kid wiped the place clean when he was… eating.” Joey heard more gagging, and felt another flash of sympathy.

“Sorry about this mate.”

“Nah, don’t be. About time something interesting happened around here, right? I’ll probably just be drinking myself to sleep for the next couple of months. But you stay safe. And make sure the kid’s taken care of, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Joey grunts.

“Take care brother. Don’t take so long to come through next time. But also, don’t have any crazy scientist shenanigans going on when you do either.”

Joey chuckles dryly, and hangs up the call with a *boop*. Massaging his eyes, he turns off the truck, the huge beast shuddering as it powers off. He leans back in his chair, thoughts whirring in his mind.

He didn’t know if what he was doing was right. Didn’t know if this was the best way to go about it.

What he did know, however, was that there was no way he was letting those sick fuckers take the kid back.

With that in mind, he drifts off, snoring lightly within moments of his eyes closing.

What he missed, however, was the tentacle that had been gingerly wrapping around the back of his chair, the sharpened point remaining mere inches away from the nape of his neck, starting from when the tentacle’s wielder had heard the word ‘gun’ until the end of the conversation.

Satisfied that there was no immediate danger, however, the tentacle slithers back underneath the baggy clothes of its owner, and soon the only sounds left in the truck were light snoring, and the even, measured breaths of a boy and his pup entering stasis.

Interlude: No-name's current progress

No-name's current Core abilities: Analyzation and adoption, shapeshifting and major regeneration, psionic link and assault, minor telekinesis, invisibility, minor osteokinesis,electrokinesis, electroreception, space warping (minor teleportation), minor clairvoyance.

As a note, all Core abilities require the use of Core energy. While at this point in time we don't have a numeric value to measure No-name's current energy, it is six times larger than when we first observed him. Now, for what his abilities do.

Analyzation and adoption: Complete understanding of whatever organic material one consumes that has still retained its original structure, down to the cellular level, and the ability to incorporate and even improve on these designs. This means one can't gain anything from prepared food, as it is too far removed from the original design. Category 1 ability.

Shapeshifting and major regeneration: In addition to its Core ability cost, this ability requires a supply of readily available biomass. In the event that there is no excess biomass in the user's system, it will break down already existing biomass incorporated into designs to fuel regeneration and other shapeshifting. Category 1 ability.

Psionic link and assault: The most common category 2 Core ability, this allows one to establish a mental link with a target, or multiple targets. Through this mental link, the user can read passive, surface level thoughts, as well as communicate mentally with their target. They can also push strong sensations through the link in an assault on the mind, potentially debilitating their quarry as the sensations overwhelm their senses. Effectiveness depends on the user's own mental strength, Core energy, and ability to concentrate, versus a target's own rivaling strengths.

Minor telekinesis: A lesser version of telekineses that is limited influencing one's own body, or small objects. Category 3 ability.

Invisibility: Invisibility can belong to multiple categories. Its effect

changes depending on whcih one it belongs to. A category 2 invisibility effect will alter another target's perception of the user. A category 3's ability relies on bending light around them, making them imperceptible to those who rely on visible light. A category 4's invisbility, however, is the most cost intensive one, as it completely removes the user from reality, making them imperceptible to all senses. No-name's invisibility falls under the category 4 variety.

Minor Osteokinesis: A lesser version of osteokinesis that is limited to influencing one's own bones, or smaller bones. Category 3 ability.

Electrokinesis: This allows the user to supercharge molecules around them, vibrating at a high frequency to produce lightning and control it. Category 3 ability.

Electroreception: Allows the user to sense the electric signals created by most living creatures with a brain. Category 2 ability.

Space Warping (Minor Teleportation): A lesser version of teleportation, this creates a tiny portal that only the user can utilize, and only with small portions of its body. This portal lasts less than a second, and keeping it open any longer costs exponentially more Core energy. Category 7 ability.

Minor Clairvoyance: No-name currently has no idea what this ability does, or how to utilize it.

No-name's current complete anatomies: Mutated canine (Wolf and Hound) anatomies, Mutated mustilidae (Honey Badger) anatomy, Mutated Homo (Human) anatomy, Mutated Sopho (Nuan) anatomy, Mutated cervidae (Elk) anatomy, Avian (Brown Thrasher and Vulture) anatomies, rodent (Porcupine) anatomy, and Mutated ursidae (Grizzly Bear) anatomy.

Standalone structures: Scything tentacles, tetrachromatic oscular system, acid glands, corrosive immunic flesh, acid secretion tract, and rigid armor.

No-name's current appearance: No-name currently resembles a thin,

well-featured young human male with long, shaggy brown hair, brown wolf ears, and a bushy brown tail. His most notable features include longer claws at the end of his fingers and toes, and slightly luminous yellow eyes. Most people mistake these features as signs of mutation. He currently stands at 1.67 meters, and weighs 72 kilograms (5'4" and 158 lbs).

Current structures utilized by No-name: A full human anatomy, with an altered digestive and respiratory tract. A total of thirty six tentacles that rest in a tight ball in his lower back, just beneath the skin. These tentacles each hold various sensory organs inside of them, including eyes and auditory nerves, as well as a line of bone tracts that allow for easier production of serrated teeth to protrude when necessary, and the tips of each tentacle end in either a barbed talon, or a sharpened point.

A note from Sonkoso

I promise I didn't purposefully make him a wolf boy. Scout's honor.

Chapter 26: Appropriate Application of Waffles

Records of the first Rift opening on Stillera are extremely hard to find, and written in a language that has been dead for several millennia. To this day no records of how our ancestors lived or what their society was like Before Rift (BR) have been recovered. The first text concerning the topic that scholars were able to decipher dates back nearly 11,000 years ago, and from what can be discerned Rifts were viewed as just another part of our world, as natural as a waterfall or a mountain range.

However, for the next 10,000 years after the first recorded sighting, Rifts remained manageable. The entities that ventured out from the Rift were of low rank (Now referred to as classes 1-3). Entities emerge from these Rifts at a slower rate, and those that do emerge are relatively easy to kill. However, in 10,577, the first medium rank (now referred to as classes 4-6) Rift was reported outside of the city of Moridon. As is known, Rift entities of a higher class are exponentially stronger than those of a lower class.

Within five years of the Rift being sighted, the city had to be evacuated, as Rift entities overwhelmed it.

Texts for the next three hundred years detail the bitter struggle between the nuan and ressan people, and the Rifts. To make matters worse, citizens that were within 200 kilometers of a recorded Rift began to show signs of mutation, developing characteristics similar to those of Rift entities. Entire cities would turn on each other, manic fear driving them to murder anyone who mutated. Mothers would drown their children, siblings would dash each other's heads against the streets, lovers would kill their beloved in their sleep. No one knows what caused this mania towards and ingrained fear of the mutants. Perhaps it was simply because they resembled the entities they warred against. It was proposed by Barria Sylver, a nuan scholar, that it may have been because mutated individuals were more susceptible to Leader class (Now known as category 5) Rift entities' control.

Whatever the reason, the nuan and resson people were driven to the brink of destruction, having had to abandon all developed cities save for a select few. By 10,893, the sapient populations of stillera were estimated to have been reduced by 60%. It was a time of despair, now referred to as the

Grave Age, with no end in sight. All hope seemed lost, and many believed it was only a matter of time before extinction came for the people of Stillera.

And then the Rift Walkers arrived.

-Resson historian Visial Urob, 'A Brief History of Stilleran Rifts', 10,992 PR

WHY IS HUMAN FOOD SO **DELICIOUS**!?

"... Yeh really should slow down kiddo." Joey grumbles, but I can hear amusement in his voice. "You're going to give yourself a stomach ache."

I look at him, and vigorously shake my head. "This one next!" I say to the… waitress, Joey called the female nuan, pointing at another thing on this menu.

For a moment she looks between me and Joey, who sighs but nods. "We'll also take the check when yeh bring it out."

"Where does he even put it all?" I hear her murmur quietly, but she writes something on her notepad and walks off. I drink my sweet tea in one gulp, and *wiggle* while I wait.

Joey is still eating the second plate of food he ordered, a 'grilled cheese' with 'agato soup'. He dunks it, and takes a bite. Inefficient! He should just drink the soup!

This will be the seventh plate of food I've ordered. Out of all of them, the 'steak and eggs' was the best.

…

Well, the best except for the ungal and waffles. Those are still my favorite.

“I hate to say it kiddo, but this will have to be the last order of food I get yeh. We’ve got to hit the road, we’re still an hour's ride out of Sacison.” Joey says, and I feel displeasure well up inside of me. But… Joey is sharing his food with me. So… I guess it’s fair.

“Okay Joey.” I sigh, and deflate. But maybe Joey will give me a protein bar later?

Wiggle.

“Now, back to what I was saying. You’ve gotta learn the appropriate application of force.” He says, taking another bite of his sandwich. “What do yeh do if someone threatens yeh with a knife?”

The knife was the shiny claw. I snort. This is easy.

“I rip off their hand, cripple their legs, and eat them.” I reply, licking my lips and looking around for the ‘waitress’. When will she bring my food?

“No.” Joey says patiently, and I frown. “Yeh run the other way. And no eating people, we talked about that.”

“But running away is cowardice!” I protest. “And not eating is a waste of biomass. And wasting biomass is rude. You said so!”

Joey shakes his head. “Running away *isn’t* cowardice. It’s saving your… well, I guess a knife isn’t something yeh’d have to worry about. But it’s saving *their* life. And people aren’t… biomass.”

Curious. “Why are people not biomass, but other lifeforms are?” I ask, and he pauses eating.

It takes a moment for him to reply. “Because people are…” He begins, but stops again. “Because people can talk. Communicate. We make art, and music oh! I’ve gotta show you music! But yeah, people are… people.”

Annoyance. Doesn’t make sense. “But wolves think too. And communicate. And have pups, and enjoy playing. And they are still killed. By people.” Like Mind-Walker.

Joey looks at me for a few moments. Then he scratches his head. “I can’t believe I have to say this. Look, people are just people. If yeh have to kill ‘em in self defense, fine. But yeh can’t eat ‘em. It’s wrong.”

I snort. *Fine*, I’ll just eat the people when others aren’t looking.

“Yeh weren’t just thinking yeh’d still eat ‘em if yeh could get away with it, were yeh?” Joey asks, staring hard at me.

Deflate, look away. How did he know!? He hasn’t formed a psionic link!

“Alright, we’ll come back to this later. Now, someone is threatening yeh with a knife. What do yeh do?”

“Run away.” I grumble.

“Good. Now, if they chase yeh down, *then* you can *defend* yourself.”

I brighten. “Can I eat them the-”

“NO!”

Ugh. Why was Joey being so difficult?

“Here you go. Would you like a go-box for your sandwich?” The waitress returned, putting my food in front of me- YES! - and looking at Joey, who shakes his head.

“Nah, thank yeh though.”

“Alrighty. Here’s the check, and you both just let me know if you need anything else okay?” She says, smiling, and I copy Joey’s nod. It is strange. Unlike the Jodie’s in the other human place, the people here give no fear scents when they look at me.

Something to think about another time. I have food to consume!

“Thanks Doc!” I call, and begin eating.

SO! GOOD!

“That’s another thing. Why do yeh keep adding ‘doc’ to your ‘thanks’?” Joey asks.

I swallow. “Doc, the Creator, was the one who told them to give me biomass. And that’s what everyone said. Even… even Mr. Standesh.” I explain, and Joey stiffens. Strange. Whenever I talk about home, Joey acts odd.

“Oh.” Is all he says.

I point to the food in my hands. “What is this? It’s very good!”

“… right, forgot yeh didn’t actually know what yeh were ordering. That’s a brisket.”

I nod. This brisket is just as good as the steak.

“Gonna have to teach yeh table manners at some point.” Joey mutters as I continue eating.

-

“The difference between the steering wheel and the wheels?” Joey asks, and I nod. “Well… this wheel controls the truck, while the other ones let it move.”

I frown. “Then why are they both wheels?” I question, and he shrugs.

“Dunno. They’re both circles that spin, I guess?”

Mmm…

I put my hands above my head, forming a circle. “Am I a wheel now?”

He smiles, resting his head on his hand. “Nah kiddo, you’re just weird.”

I drop my hands. Being weird is not good. Makes it harder to blend in with humans.

“We’re almost at Sacison now.” He says, tapping on the wheel around his neck. “Another fifteen minutes. I’m going to introduce yeh to some people.”

“Are they friends?” I question. “Like Oscar?”

“Somethin’ like that. My son, and my… wife.”

Hesitation for the second one. Is a wife not a friend?

Wait.

“Joey, you’re a sire?” I ask, and he looks at me.

“A what?”

“A sire, a Creator. A… parent?”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m a dad. My son’s name is Gaster. He’s around your age, actually. Maybe yeh could be mates.”

Mmm… mates. Friends. Friends provide shelter, and biomass.

Now that I think about it…

“Joey, are we friends?”

He laughs. Was that amusing? Why?

“Kinda weird, being friends with someone half my age. But yeah, I guess we are.”

Pleasant. There’s a strange feeling now. Warm, and light. I think I like being Joey’s friend. He’s not annoying or a coward like Mind-Walker.

…

The warm feeling is gone.

I look at the pup, still sleeping on my legs, and groom it. The uncomfortableness is gone again, as the pup comes out of stasis with a yawn, licking my other hand.

“Yeh should name it.” Joey remarks from the side. “We can’t just keep calling it ‘pup’.”

“Waffles.” I say immediately, and Joey laughs again.

“Waffles the wolf, eh? Sure, that’s a good name for ‘em I suppose. Actually, wait, is it a boy? We’ll have to take it to the vet later. Anyways, we also have to think of a name for yeh, No-na-”

“Waffles!” I interrupt, and he turns to me.

“... look, I get that yeh like waffles, but-”

“Waffles.” I insist, but he shakes his head. Annoyance. “Why not? You said it was a good name!”

He rolls his eyes. Even more annoyance! Maybe I don’t want to be Joey’s friend after all!

“It’s a good name for a *pet*. But you’re a person. Yeh need a proper name kiddo.”

Mmm…

“Brisket?” I venture, and he shakes his head again.

“Yeh just learned that word an hour ago. No, mate. Yeh can’t name yourself after food. It’s weird.” He says patiently, and I frown.

Naming yourself after food is perfectly normal! Not weird at all!

Ugh. Fine!

X1… nope. Don’t like that. Reminds me of home, and the humans at home might recognize it.

Shape-Changer? Never liked that name. It’s just what the pack took to calling me, because of my Core ability.

“If yeh need some, I can list ‘em off for yeh.” Joey offers, but I shake my head.

Doc? Doc provided biomass, but naming myself after the Creator feels

wrong. And it also reminds me too much of home.

I think about all of the name's I've heard, but I don't like any of them. Except for one.

"Joey." I say, and he looks at me.

"Yeah? What's up kiddo?"

"My name. I want it to be Joey."

Joey goes still, then glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "Why?"

"Because Joey is the first human I've met that hasn't hurt me. He's provided shelter, and he shares biomass. Joey is my friend." I state.

Joey says nothing for a long time, but I hear a strange sound from him. Like a sniff, but more wet.

"Joey?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah." He says, his voice going high for a moment before softening. He wipes one hand against his eyes. "Yeah, alright kiddo. Joey it is."

Happy.

Wiggle.

We sit in silence for a little bit, before Joey talks again. "You'll also need a last name."

I tilt my head, and he continues as if expecting me to not understand. "Your last name is normally a family name. Mine is Satom, because me dad's last name was Satom. But yeh can make yours whatever yeh want." I nod. Understand.

"Waffles!" I exclaim. He looks at me, and I glare at him. "My name is Joey Waffles." I insist, and he sighs, dragging his hand down his face.

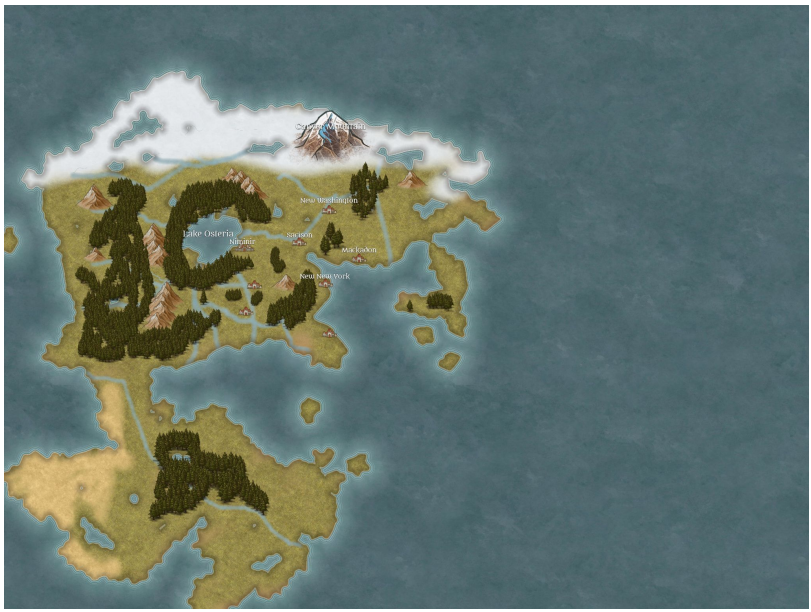
"Alright. Nice to meet you, Joey Waffles."

Chapter 27: Make More of Them

A note from Sonkoso

Heya! that surprise I mentioned is here in the spoiler

An veeery incomplete map of Stillera, I'm still working on it.



“How are you holding up Doctor?” Devon asked as he slumped down into his chair, dark circles around his eyes. Doctor Rester snorted as he took his own seat next to him, resisting the urge to rest his head against the table in front of them.

“About as well as you look.” He replied, and Devon smiled tiredly.

“So not that great, then.” He grumbled, while more people streamed into the conference room. They both sat in silence, idle chatter filling the room around them while people took their own respective seats. They both watched on listlessly, before Devon spoke again. “To think,

just three months ago my biggest worry was how I was going to complete my thesis. Now…"

Doctor Rester patted him on the shoulder. "Have you been seeing the counselor I recommended?" He asked, and Devon nodded.

"Everyone else on the team was cleared for work by her a few weeks ago. Don't know how much good it's been doing me though." He muttered darkly. Then, shifting in his seat, he leaned towards the Doctor. "Do you still have them? The nightmares?"

Flashes of that night played through Rester's mind. The smell of gunpowder, the feeling of the recoil. Bodies dropping, blood splattering onto walls as shell casings clattered against the floor. "Yes, Devon. I still have them."

"Counselor says that they'll go away soon. Sooner, if... if we take the memory cleanser."

Rester sharply turned his head to Devon. For a moment, just a moment, he thought about dissuading him. About reminding him that if he took it, he'd have his SCI revoked. That cleansing three months of memories carried severe risks. That if he relapsed, there was nearly a 70% chance that his psyche would break. But one look at the haunted look in his eyes, and the defeated posture he'd had for the past few months, caused the arguments to die in his mind before he could voice them. Instead, he gave Devon's shoulder what he hoped was a comforting squeeze.

"I won't tell you take it or not." He began gently. "Just know that no matter what you decide, it won't make you any less or better of a person. And I'll always think of you as a friend."

Devon stared at him for a few moments, before smiling. "I never said I would take it, Doctor." He replied, turning back to the front. Then, very quietly, "But thank you."

They sat in silence once more, even while the rest of the room chattered away. But it isn't long before Doctor Rester speaks up.

"You said that the rest of our team was cleared for work again?" He

asks, and Devon nods.

“Yes. Rose has been assigned to Androtech HQ, while Carl is actually working here in Sacison.” He murmurs, but a sadness soon overtakes his expression. “But Hunt… he’s been admitted to a psychiatric ward.”

I wish I could say I was surprised, with how he was acting in his interview. Doctor Rester thinks bitterly. *If only I...*

“Room, tench hut!” A voice at the door called, and everyone hurriedly stood up, postures straightening as the Colonel walked into the room. He looked around, his piercing black eyes surveying everyone present, before he nodded.

“As you were.” He ordered, and everyone sat back down as he walked to the head of the table. Following after him were the thirteen personnel who were assigned to the containment squad, who stood at parade rest in front of the table as the Colonel took his seat. Or at least, there should have been thirteen of them. Four were missing.

Casualties. The Doctor thought bitterly

“Agent Broker, call-sign Reaper, you may begin your report.” The Colonel said once he had seated himself, and all heads turned to the group as a man with a buzzcut and multiple scars stood at attention.

“Yes sir. Now, I’m going to begin this briefing with the understanding that everyone present is aware of the mission we were assigned, as well as the secondary objective of that mission.” Broker said, tapping on the high-end circlet around his neck. A holographic screen sprang into existence in front of him, and he swiped his hand, manipulating the interface until a video was put on display. In the video was a surprisingly large tree, with a hollowed out center in front of it. The Doctor immediately recognized it as the wolf den X1 had last been sighted at.

“Our squad was split into two teams. Six of them, including myself, were the first to encounter the target in quadrant two. We made first contact at 0936.” He pressed play, and the group watched as the base

of the tree splintered inwards with a deafening *crack* from the force of the round that pierced through it. Which was shocking, considering that the round itself was completely soundless.

That's Androtech for you.

"It is unclear how the target," Broker continues, "managed to detect the first tranquilizer. But heat signatures on all of our sensors indicated that it did just that, as it quickly dodged the first," the video goes on as another tranquilizer round pierces the den, before an absurdly large, black wolf charged out of it, "and the second, and all rounds after that."

Tentacles waved in the air, each one covered in eyes, scanning the area. All the while, X1 continues to move with almost blinding speed to Doctor Rester, evading every shot. Finally, the feed blurs a bit, before quickly returning to normal. X1 appears rather rattled when the video focuses on it again.

"We believe that X1 activated some sort of electrical pulse ability here, likely category 3." Broker says, pausing the video.

"That's not possible!" Doctor Rester exclaims, his chair scraping backwards as he bursts to his feet, and all heads turn to him. The Colonel regards him coolly.

"Explain, Doctor Rester."

"The biomap and Core design we gave X1 has no capabilities for Core abilities other than Category 1 and Category 2."

Devon also hesitantly stands up. "It's true. All lab personnel assigned to the development of X1 can attest that its biomap had no such capabilities."

At this, everyone present began muttering amongst themselves, while Agent Broker simply narrowed his eyes.

"I am only giving a report of what me and my team experienced during our contact with the target." He says, and the din of voices quiet once more. Shaking his head in disbelief, Doctor Rester sits back down, followed quickly by Devon.

“You may resume your report.” The Colonel gestures with a hand, and Broker nods.

“The reason we presumed it to have a category 3 ability, is that the visual feedback from our helmets were also interfered with, though for a fraction of the time that our circlets were.” Broker resumes the video, and tentacles practically explode out from X1. Doctor Rester is shocked at the speed at which they move, which completely eclipsed the speed, length, and number that were observed just two and a half months prior to the video’s date. They quickly wrap around an invisible figure, but are just as quickly severed by a compressed blade of wind, presumably one of the team’s Core abilities.

“After discerning that it was able to react to the tranquilizer rounds, and the threat it possessed, our team deemed it necessary to switch to subsonic static rounds.” He says, and the group watches as parts of X1’s main body are ripped out, charred by the electricity in each bullet. Despite the murders X1 had committed, Doctor Rester still can’t help but wince at the damage his creation sustained.

His greatest creation. He realizes, as a twisted sense of pride fills him. *In just a little over two months it went from barely killing rats to requiring a class 4 response team.*

“After sustaining damage, the target began its retreat.” X1 blurs as it leaps into the air, latching onto a tree and jumping to the side of another one in a blinding display of speed.

“The target is running away!” One of them exclaims, and Doctor Rester notices the barest hint of a wince from Broker at the break in the strict psionic comm order. The video blurs as the rest of them move just as fast as X1 had, to which Broker slows the video down for the rest of the non-Cored or low-class Cored in the room to follow. They watch as X1’s tentacles wrap around a branch and flings itself into the air, wings forming in record shattering pace compared to its last observed formation speed.

The squadron doesn’t miss the chance to fire at X1 now that it’s mobility had been reduced, and quickly brings it down. Doctor Rester winces again as he sees it crashing through the treeline, momentarily stunned.

“Here, the rest of our squad attempts to pincer the target.” Broker explains, as more rounds are fired. X1 slings itself from a branch, just barely dodging out of the way again, and resumes running. And…

For a moment the Doctor can’t believe his eyes. Did X1 just get *faster!?*

It gets farther and farther away, and then…

“And here is where X1 displays *another* Core ability that wasn’t registered on his biomap.” Broker says almost spitefully, as X1 *vanishes*. The team rushes past its last sighted location, slowing down and scanning the area for a few minutes, but X1 is nowhere to be seen.

Doctor Rester is slack jawed, and he turns to look at Devon who is similarly stunned.

“That shouldn’t be possible.” He whispers again. But already his mind was rapidly analyzing what he had seen.

What if… *What if X1’s ability wasn’t just being able to replicate biological structures, but also… Core abilities!*

“It is at this point that we declare that there was a containment failure.” Broker says, and the video resumes to normal speed. “Except, for reasons unbeknownst to us… one of the officers that escorted us had entered the forest.”

The squad returns to the location they had last seen X1, and a few of them mutter curses at what they see. The area is painted with blood, where a police woman has been savagely ripped apart, her body lying in pieces all over the ground.

But Doctor Rester’s mind is still reeling from his realization. A light feeling bubbles up within him, then. He chuckles, at first just a few dry coughs that quickly evolves into cackling.

“Is something funny, Doctor?” The Colonel asks, but all he can do is laugh harder.

X1… you have exceeded all expectations! An unprecedented success!

“Doctor, any more laughter and I’ll have you escorted out.” The Colonel snaps, and instantly the laughter stops. But Devon recognizes the mad gleam in the Doctor’s eyes.

Pride.

He was *proud* of X1. Of everything it had done.

And to his shock… Devon found he was proud too.

Have I gone mad?

“But wait, Agent Broker.” One of the agents sitting at the table says, and he turns to look at him. “There were casualties among you, but the video doesn’t display anything of the sort.”

Broker regards the agent who spoke coldly, before he fast forwards through the video. Until a familiar looking bunker greets them all.

“That brings me to the secondary objective of the mission.” He says, his tone clipped. “Recovery of the materials inside of the labs.”

Unease fills Doctor Rester, and he can hear Devon’s breath beginning to speed up. He knew neither of them were ready to see this place again. To revisit the memories that haunted them in their sleep, even if they were but fragments of emotion and flashes of sensation while they were conscious.

“Doctor Rester, Senior Researcher Grandhall,” a voice says quietly behind them, and they both wheel around in their chairs to see a familiar female inquisitor, “if you both wouldn’t mind following me.”

Almost too hurriedly they stand up from their chairs. The rest of the room doesn’t spare them a glance as the video resumes, and Agent Broker continues his report. They follow the inquisitor out of the door, and into a brightly lit hallway. She continues to lead them until they arrive at a metal door. She places a hand on the scanner next to it, and the door clicks open, swinging inwards.

They enter, and see a team of nearly forty researchers in white lab coats sitting at another long table in a very large room. The group all stand and offer a chorus of greetings. The pair turns to look at her

inquisitively, and she stares at them both.

“The Colonel has relieved you of his command.” She says quietly, and Doctor Rester feels shock run through his system.

“But-” His protest stops when he notices her head bow politely to someone behind them.

“He didn’t appreciate either of your talents anyways. I always thought Doctor Grant was a tool, honestly have no idea what he saw in him.” A mirthful voice says from behind them, and the spin back around to see…

A handsome, well built man dressed in a bright pink floral shirt, blue khakis and yellow sandals. His blonde hair looks almost windblown back, natural waves flowing in locks down his shoulders, while his skin has the healthy bronze glow that suggested he enjoyed his time outside. But the most striking feature about him are his eyes, the sclera a dark black while his irises were bright green and glowing.

“President Satez.” Doctor Rester respectfully greets the president of Androtech, bowing his own head, while Devon’s eyes widen in shock.

“P-presi-” He sputters, his grey skin paling to an almost white, to which President Satez waves his hand with a laugh.

“Just call me Satez, thankyouverymuch. You must be Rester’s protege, he speaks highly of you in his reports. And yes, I do read those by the way. The lab head ones, at least.” He says, offering a hand, which Devon takes hesitantly. After a few well-mannered pumps from Satez, he pulls back his hand and chuckles at Doctor Rester, while Devon stares at his own in reverence.

“I’m never washing this hand again.” He whispers.

“Rester, you’re losing your mad doctor charm. Stop looking down.”

Doctor Rester raises his head, frowning. “I’m not a mad doctor. And your fashion is as terrible as ever.” He retorts, and Devon looks at him in horror. To his shock, however, Satez only rolls his eyes.

“Right, right. Don’t think I forgot what you were like in college. We

all placed bets on who would be the first to end a world with their crazy inventions, and you were number one. And my fashion is stellar, thankyouverymuch! Oh, and thank you Gralia, you can go now." He calls to the inquisitor, who bows one more time and steps out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Why did you call us here?" Doctor Rester asks, his tone still respectful even if his words weren't.

"Ah, right. I'm here to introduce you to your new team!" Satez says, wrapping an arm around Rester's shoulders and dragging him to the front. Much to his annoyance. "Everyone, I'm sure you've all heard of Doctor Rester here. He'll be taking over the lab in HQ."

He turns to Satez, eyebrows raised. "I'll be what?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, you're being promoted." Satez says, and Rester coughs awkwardly.

"President Satez, with all due respect… why, exactly?"

The President leans in until his lips are almost touching Rester's ears. "X1, you called your first specimen?" Doctor Rester nods, and Satez continues. "Good. I've seen the footage. What it can do. It's the most promising specimen that's been created in Androtech yet. A 'possible solution to the Rifts' I believe were your exact words? I want you to make more of them. X2, X3, and X4."

Devon makes a choking sound, and the Doctor stares at Satez, who stares back. With bright, gleaming lunacy in both of their eyes.

Finally, Doctor Rester smiles.

"I'll let my granddaughter know that I'll be able to attend her Induction ceremony after all."

Chapter 28: My Name is Joey Waffles!

"Alright." Joey says, his elbow leaning outside of the door structure. He is looking ahead of us, at all of the other movement structures - cars, I've learned - on the road. And there are so many! They are all around us, slowly moving towards a *biiiig* structure. It extends far past what the human ocular organs can see, even the enhanced design I'd made.

"Alright." I use the songbird syrinx, mimicking Joey's voice, and also lean my elbow out of the door structure. Oh, this is very pleasant. Comfortable. Joey makes an amused sound, and Waffles growls at the car next to us. They also have a pup, but…

Smug. Waffles' design is superior.

The other pup knows this, as its ears flatten and it cowers. Very good, Waffles. I groom it with my hand to let it know I am pleased with its territorial display, and the pup licks my hand.

"We're getting close to the gate now." Joey continues, and I nod, pointing at the big structure.

"Gate." I echo, and Joey nods.

"Well, that's the wall that surrounds the city and connects to the gate, but yes." Joey affirms, and I nod wisely.

"Wall gate." I repeat, and Joey makes another amused sound.

"Yes buddy, wall gate. Anyways, we shouldn't have any problems. If the blue boys ask to see your circlet and identification, say yeh just haven't registered for a new one after your mutation." He says, pointing at the circle around his neck. All humans seem to have that circle.

I turn to look at Joey, tilting my head. "But I never had this… circlet."

"I know buddy, just say yeh did." He says, and I gasp.

"But that is a lie!" I protest. "And lies are cowardice!"

Joey sighs, scratching his face hair. "Well, lying *is* bad mate, yeh got that one down." He confirms. "But sometimes yeh *have* to lie. If yeh don't… look, it's not cowardice if yeh lie to the blue boys."

I frown, confused. Lying is cowardice, but lying to the blue boys is not?

"Okay." I say finally. "I did not register for a new circlet after my mutation." I pause, tilting my head. "Joey, what is a mutation?"

He hums for a few moments, what I've learned now is the human noise for consideration. "You'll learn more about that at school, but… it's what happens to some folks when they get exposed to a Rift. Gives 'em a Core, makes 'em look a little different from regular folk. Like your ears and your tail… and all of your tentacles. People out in the boonies, they tend to not like it. Reminds 'em of the bad times."

I nod, understanding. "So I should not have ears and a tail?" I ask. It will be inconvenient, these structures make the human anatomy more efficient, but if it will help blend with humans…

Joey looks at me, something like the fear scent coming off of him. "What? No, I mean, yeh can keep your ears and tail. Yeh don't have to chop 'em off or anything. Big cities like Sacison and Mackadon, there are tons of mutated blokes around." He says, and I nod again.

Joey looks ahead. We've gotten much closer to the gate, and I can see two humans standing on the road. They are wearing the same superior armor structures that the humans who hunted me in the woods did. Well… not the same. They are visible.

"Alright kiddo, remember to introduce yourself. It's polite." Joey reminds me, and I groom the pup.

When we get close to the gate, one of the humans approaches Joey's door. "G'day mate." Joey greets, and the armor human - blue boy, Joey called them - nods.

"Mornin. What're you transporting?" He asks, and Joey shrugs.

"Ah, bit of goods from Razer Corps. Was supposed to make the delivery to Mackadon, but the route was shut down for Rift

Containment." Joey says, and the armor human shakes his head.

"Heard about that, we've gotten a few transport vehicles comin back for that same reason." He says, sorriness in his tone. He looks past Joey, to me. "That your son?"

"Hello!" I greet. "My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!"

The guard makes an amused sound, nodding. "Yes you are!" The blue boy says politely back, and I smile. Humans have been much nicer since I started to look like them. "Since you're comin back from a compromised route, I'll have to scan your vehicle. Anything I should know about?"

Joey shakes his head. "Nah, nothin too much. Oh, kiddo's mutated, that might trip your scanners." He warns, and the blue boy pulls out a strange structure.

"Shouldn't be a problem. Just a sec, and…" The blue boy trails off as the structure beeps. Joey pauses, his hand tightening on the steering wheel as the guard raises another structure.

Freeze.

Recognize that structure. Shoots the powerful *pain*.

"Step out of the vehicle. Both of you." The blue boy says, and I bristle. The voice is threatening.

"Hold on there mate, scanner might've bugged-"

"I said step out of the vehicle." The blue boy repeats, his tone much more threatening now. I growl, raising my tentacles behind me. Waffles growls too, sensing the threat. Joey looks panicked as he looks between the both of us.

"Calm down there kiddo. And we'll step out, officer, just a few moments." He says. The officer says nothing, only keeping the structure aimed at us.

I can kill him and the other blue boy approaching. I do not sense cores from them, it will be easy. "Joey, are they going to hurt you?" I

ask, and Joey shakes his head.

"No kiddo, they won't. Put your tentacles away." He whispers. "Listen, their scanner must've tripped off of you. We'll get out, and they'll scan again."

I nod, but open small holes in my skin, preparing bone spikes and osteokinesis in case they attack. Core energy is at 86%.

I open the door, grooming Waffles as I step down onto the road. Joey walks around the car, arms raised as he stands next to me. Waffles growls as one of the blue boys approaches us, his structure raised.

"Alright." He calls. "They're both out, scan the vehicle again."

The other blue boy walks around too, holding up the scanning structure. It doesn't beep, and he turns it on us.

Beep.

They look at me, then Joey, then Waffles.

"Got two core sigs. Class 4 and class 1." The one who had talked to Joey says, their weapon structures lowering. They are exhibiting nervous behaviors. "Sorry sir, I didn't realize he was a class 4. Were you aware that you were transporting a mutated wolf as well?"

Joey looks confused for a moment, looking at me and Waffles, before shrugging. "No, I accidentally hit the pup with me truck. We were just about to take it to the vet." Joey says. I frown.

It's not a *lie*, I think. He hit me, but also hit Waffles.

The blue boy nods. "And is… Mr. Waffles, registered with RCO or the BA?" He asks.

Ohhh, I can smell it now. The ***fear*** scent. But why?

Joey shakes his head again. "No, kiddo mutated recently. That was the second order of business, actually."

The two blue boys nod, making a relieved noise. They're no longer

raising their weapons, so I deconstruct the bone spikes. "Very well then sir, apologies for the interruption. Please make sure Mr. Waffles and the wolf pup are registered by the end of the day." He says, and Joey nods.

"Will do officer." He says, and the blue boys step back. Joey makes a relieved sound, breathing out. "Alright kiddo, let's hop back in the truck."

I nod, as Waffles growls at the officers one last time. Another wonderful threat display Waffles! All of the grooming for you!

When we get back in the truck, Joey starts driving again. The surrounding area goes dark as we drive past the gate, and underneath the wall. There are small lights on the side, but I will ask about them later. Joey looks… not scared, not nervous. But still displays slight cowardice. His body is trembling.

"Joey?" I inquire, and Joey jumps, before looking at me.

"Ah… sorry kiddo, shook me up was all. Waffles is uh… Waffles is mutated?" He asks, and I think about this for a little bit.

"You said the Core was given *after* mutation, correct?" Joey nods, and I shake my head.

"Then no. Waffles had his Core when he was sired." I clarify, and Joey's eyes go wide.

"Wait, he's Gifted?" Joey asks, and I look at him, confused. Joey runs a hand down his face. "Right, yeah, sorry, forget yeh wouldn't know what that means. Things born with a natural Core are called Gifted."

Ah, then if that is the case. "Yes, Waffles is… Gifted." I affirm, and Joey whistles.

"Well, that's a damn good wolf to have on your side then." He says, and I am curious again.

"Is there a difference between them?" I ask, and Joey nods.

"Aye, there is yeah. Mutated Cores are static." When Joey sees my

confusion, he makes an amused sound. I will have to ask what that is called, humans have a word for everything. "It means they don't grow, get more powerful. Well, they *can*, but it takes a lot of work. Natural Cores, though, get stronger over time. At least…" Joey frowns, shrugging. "That's the best way I can explain it. I don't know the specifics, I'm just telling you what my wife told me. She'll be able to explain the difference better, since she's also Gifted."

I nod, considering for a few moments. "So… natural Cores are superior?"

Joey thinks about this. "Yeah, I guess you could look at it that way." He says, and I smile.

Smug. My design truly is superior in every way. I allow Joey to bask in my superiority.

Wiggle!

"Joey, what do you ca-" I begin to ask what the amused sounds are called, but stop when everything becomes light again.

THERE ARE SO MANY **BIG** BUILDINGS AROUND! **BIG BIG!**

Which means…

FOOOOOOD!

"Joey! Joey, can we stop at one of the buildings to get biomass!?" I ask, tugging on Joey's sleeve, and he rolls his eyes. Annoyance? How can he possibly be annoyed with getting *biomass!?* The pup agrees with me, yipping with his tongue out.

"Kiddo, yeh just ate like… an hour ago. How are yeh still hungry?" He asks, and I snort.

"We should acquire biomass whenever it is possible." I say wisely. Even pups know about this. It is okay though, I will teach Joey. "You can never have enough."

Joey sighs. "You're going to eat me out of my wallet." He grumbles, and I recoil, confused. How could he think that?

"I will *not* eat you. Joey is my friend!" I quickly assure him, and Joey makes an amused sound. He pats my head, and I growl. No touch!

Joey shakes his head. "Right, right, sorry I forgot. It's just a saying. Tell yeh what kiddo, we can go get something to eat after I bring you home." I freeze, and when Joey sees me he looks… sad. "A real home, kiddo. A real one. Not the lab."

A different home? I suppose that is okay. I am curious about what Joey's home looks like. So I instead watch all of the big buildings pass by. There are so many people here. More than I've ever seen. Some of them use the nuan structure, some use the human. And some use a structure that looks similar to both, but is different.

New structure? I lick my lips, then look guiltily at Joey.

Breaking the no eating promise would be cowardice… okay. If they try to attack me, I will only eat a little bit.

We enter a new area, with less people. The buildings are smaller, and there is grass outside of them. Until, finally, we arrive at a building that looks a lot like the other ones.

"Alright kiddo." Joey says, his voice pleasant. "We're home."

I hurriedly exit the truck, the pup yipping as I set it down. It runs around the grass before squatting down, removing waste product from its digestive tract. I sigh.

An embarrassing display of an inferior anatomy. It doesn't utilize all of the biomass. But that is okay, I will take care of it anyways.

I hear Joey's door close loudly, and he walks up to the home door. I tilt my head. He hesitates. Why?

But the hesitation doesn't last, and he opens the door. "Come on kiddo, let's get yeh and the pup settled. We still have a busy day." He says, before calling into the house. "Gasty? Gasty, you home?" Me and the pup walk in, and I look around. It is small inside, but… it feels nice. There are stairs that lead up, and we are in a hall that leads to more of the home.

"Dad?" I hear another voice come from up the stairs, vibrating at a frequency even lower than Joey's. Another big human comes, but I recognize his features as an adolescent human. Though his skin is darker, he resembles Joey a lot. Even with no face hair, his smile is the same.

"Come downstairs kiddo, I've got someone I'd like you to meet." Joey says, and I hear the warmth in his tone. Gasty thumps down the stairs, pausing as he sees me and Waffles. He displays cowardice behavior, his smile dropping as his shoulders hunch. Hmm…

It is alright. Joey said we would be friends, so I will teach him to stop his cowardice!

"Hello!" I greet. "My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!"

Joey makes an amused noise, while Gasty looks confused. "Uh… hi. My name's Gaster." He says quietly, approaching me. The pup walks forward to assess the human for me. He sniffs Gaster, then begins wagging his tail and exposes his weak underside.

…

Amazing! Truly, he is related to Joey. He put Waffles into submission! Gaster's smile is back, as he grooms Waffles' exposed weakness. "He's cute! Or is it a she?"

"Waffles is a female!" I say helpfully, and Gaster makes an amused sound, smiling up at me. "I am biologically male!"

Gaster makes the sound again. "I kind of figured." He says, and Joey looks on with a smile on his face.

"Joey?" I hear another voice call, and everyone flinches. I bristle. The tone is threatening.

I look up the stairs again, and see a female with darker skin than Gaster standing there. Her eyebrows are scrunched, nostrils flaring. Waffles scrabbles back to his feet, about to growl before whimpering and hiding behind my legs, his tail tucked.

Waffles has sensed it. The **fear** that she causes in us by instinct.

This female is…

A *PREDATOR*.

Chapter 29: A Home To Feel Safe In

The recording is shaky, as it captures multiple figures in white hazmat suits from a distance, milling around. They have scanners in their hands, multiple off-road vehicles and make-shift stations set up around the area.

"I am at the site where two hikers, Brian O'Connel and Cassidy Grant, were said to have gone missing." A voice whispers from behind the camera. "The entrance to the hiking trail has been quarantined by a federal agency who refused to identify themselves. I have managed to sneak past the cordon."

The video zooms in to follow one person in a hazmat suit as they walk behind a truck. The camera zooms back out, still shaky as footsteps crunch leaves underneath the recorder's feet. It slowly moves from its position, and as it does so, ***something*** *becomes visible in the air beyond the truck that was obscuring its vision. The recording distorts as it focuses on this* ***something****. It appears to be a large, bowling ball sized orb of darkness, bending the very air around it as it hovers in position about six feet off of the ground.*

Whispers begin to fill the air, hundreds of alien voices murmuring in an incomprehensible language, and the camera hurriedly turns away to instead focus on a large white tent.

"Just before I started recording, there were gunshots. When I got into position, they had carried something away into that tent." The voice continues. The tent flap opens, another person in a hazmat suit walking out with dark blood staining their front. Just before the flap is closed, a black, alien form can be observed on a table, its chest split open and tentacles spilling out from its back.

"What the fuck is tha-"

The voice is interrupted as the figure who had exited the tent stops and points at the camera. "HEY! YOU CAN'T BE HERE, IT'S NOT SA-"

The recording cuts, resuming as trees hurriedly whips past the cameras view. The recorder's breath is ragged, running through the forest. The recording snaps around to focus on the recorder's face. "My name… is

*Richard Hues…" He pants. "If I… go missing… I was **here**, at the… Black Angel trail in New Hampshire." The recorder staggers as a gunshot sounds in the air, collapsing to the ground with a groan.*

"I'm uploading… this now…" He grunts, then freezes. His eyes go completely black, his mouth opening in a silent scream as whispers begin to fill the air again. He drops the camera, and it falls away to focus on a tree. Off screen, hundreds of voices begin to laugh in unison as the recorder shrieks.

- End of Richard Hues' recording of Site Alpha

Waffles whines between my legs, as I warily gaze up at the female at the top of the stairs.

The ***predator*** says nothing, and for a few moments no one moves. **Instinct** screams at me to flee, to grab Waffles and escape. It is cowardice, but acceptable cowardice. I know that no matter what I do, I will not be able to kill this female.

I growl, my ears flattening. The female finally seems to notice both myself and Waffles, and I tense. We must flee! We must-

"Hey mom." Gaster says, ***smiling***!? How can he smile at the **predat-**.

Confusion. The **fear** is gone now. The female no longer feels like a **predator**, now just another human. Hmm… the same thing happened before, with Star-Reader. Is it because the female is no longer hostile?

"Who is he?" She asks, gesturing towards me. I swallow. But I must be polite. Joey said so.

"My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!" I introduce, and mom looks confused.

"Joey… *Waffles*?" She looks confused, glancing between me and Joey. He clears his throat, scratching the back of his head.

"Hey love. It's a uh… it's a long story." He says, before turning to Gaster. "Gasty, can yeh take Joey and the pup up to your room? Me and your mum have a lot to talk about. Also, uh… Joey's a little different, just so yeh know. He's been… isolated for a while."

Gaster nods. "Come on Joey. Okay, this is weird, you have the same name as my dad." He starts walking up the stairs, and I pick up Waffles to follow. When we pass mom, she presses her lips to Gaster's cheek.

"I ordered some pizzas. You can share it with your new friend, it should arrive outside of your window in just a few minutes. Just save me and your dad a couple of slices." She says, and I can hear the warmth in her tone. He nods, and mom glares back at Joey. "Living room. Now."

Joey nods, and she walks down the steps as we enter another room.

Gaster closes the door, sighing as he looks around. "Um… you can sit anywhere, if you want. The bed's open, or my chair." He mumbles, gesturing to two different structures. He exhibits uncomfortableness, shifting from one foot to the other. Hmm…

"Gaster, do you not want me in your room?" I ask, setting down Waffles who yips and hops onto a soft looking structure, which Gaster called a bed. He looks panicked, hurriedly shaking his head.

"Oh, no! I mean, it's okay." He assures me. "I'm just not used to having people over, usually it's just Sariel." I tilt my head.

"Is Sariel your mate?" I ask, and Gaster walks over to the bed and sits down. Waffles hops onto his lap, which causes Gaster to smile again.

"She's a good mate of mine, yeah." He confirms, and I nod, observing the room. There are humans and nuans frozen in time on the wall, smiling as they look out. Some of them wear armor, while some wear strange, brightly colored clothing. Gaster notices me looking, and he shifts uncomfortably.

"Gaster, how did you freeze those humans on your wall?" I ask. "Did the preda- did mom do that?" It would be an interesting Core ability!

Gaster's brows crease. "Uh… you mean the posters?" He asks, shrugging. "My mom got them for me, yeah."

Amazing! I am glad I did not attempt to fight mom. "A wonderful display of foes defeated. Even if it is a waste of biomass" I nod approvingly, and Gaster makes the amused sound.

"Well, most of them haven't lost yet." He says, then pauses. "Wait, you don't think they're actually there, do you?"

I pause. I had said something odd. "No…" I lie, but lying is cowardice. "Yes."

Gaster makes the amused sound once more, shaking his head. "You're a pretty weird dude." I frown. Being weird is bad. "How do you not know what a poster is? Dad mentioned you were isolated for a while, but still. Have you been living in the wilderness or something?"

I nod, while Waffles yips. "Yes! How did you know?" I exclaim.

"Wait, really?" He asks hesitantly, and I nod once more.

"Really." I affirm. Gaster looks… sorry.

"Oh."

We say nothing for a few moments, Gaster grooming waffles with an uncomfortable expression. But I am still curious. "So if these are not foes defeated, how are the… posters created?" I ask, and Gaster shrugs.

"Well, through visual effects mostly. They take a picture of them, add some cool effects to it, and there you go."

"Picture?" I ask, and Gaster nods. He taps on his circlet.

"Yup, like this. Here, I'll show you. Look at me?"

I look, and see a blue light on his circlet glow. He taps his circlet again, and I see myself frozen in time hovering in the air.

My eyes go wide, and I touch my frozen self. My hand goes right

through it, and Gaster makes the amused sound. "Can… can all circlets do this?" I ask, and he smiles.

"Yup! Just need -" He stops as there is a knock outside the window. Waffles yips and growls, and I see a structure hovering outside of it, holding two boxes that look like a larger, flatter version of the go-boxes Joey got at food buildings sometimes.

"Oh, pizza's here." He opens the window, taking the boxes and setting them down on the bed beside him. He opens one of them, and…

It smells *delicious!*

"Ham and chewbek, nice!" He exclaims, lifting up a piece and taking a bite. He holds up the box to me, while Waffles whines on his lap. "Here, get yourself one. Have you had pizza before?"

I shake my head, taking two pieces of the pizza and shoving it into my mouth.

SO! GOOD!

Wiggle!

Gaster makes the amused sound, and I have had enough. "What is that called?" I ask, pointing at him, and Gaster looks behind him, then points at himself.

"What?"

"The sound you make. What is it called?" I clarify, and he looks at me strangely.

"Uh… are you talking about laughter?" He asks, and I nod. Laughter is a good sound.

Waffles attempts to steal some pizza, but I growl. Waffles' ears press against his head in submission, looking at me guiltily. Gaster shakes his head, grooming him.

"It's okay, we have like two more whole pizzas." He assures me, grabbing a slice. Then he pauses. "Unless you don't want your dog to

eat people food, in which case I get it."

"Waffles is *not* a dog!" I correct him. Dogs are the hound structure, and *they* are utterly inferior designs. "Waffles is a wolf, the superior form of canine!"

Gaster looks surprised, and he nods slowly. "Right… wait, you said you lived in the wild. Is that where you got him?" He asks, while Waffles tries to sneakily steal a slice of pizza. Impudence! But… Gaster said it is okay. If he is willing to share his biomass, then I will allow it.

"Yes. His pack was…" I trail off, hesitating. The uncomfortable feeling is rising in my chest again, and I frown. "He is all that is left of the pack."

Gaster looks uncomfortable again. "That's sad." He says quietly, grooming Waffles who happily swallows down a slice of pizza. I sense that I have made the conversation bad. Hmm… talking to people other than Joey is hard. But I sensed that Gaster liked talking about the posters. Maybe that will help.

"Do you know any of them?" I ask, pointing to one of the posters while taking another slice of pizza. Gaster's expression becomes happy again.

"Yes, actually! My mom works for the BA - oh, you probably don't know what that is. The Rift Bounty Agency, basically they take private contracts to hunt down Rift Entities. You have to have a Core to be a member of it." Woah! Gaster's energy has increased! As expected, this is a good topic of conversation. "Anyways, she's really good mates with a lot of 'em. I met Crimson Flash before, she's like, super cool!"

I nod, not understanding but happy that Gaster is excited. "Crimson Flash is cool." I repeat, and Gaster nods emphatically.

"Yup, that's her right there." He points at a poster with a nuan female wearing red clothing. It is tight, and I see red dots floating off of her form. Behind her, countless defeated foes make a mountain. "Her newest Sim Game is supposed to come out later this year."

I tilt my head. "Sim game?" I ask, and he stands up.

"Yup! Here." He walks over to a table and grabs a strange device, handing it to me, then pauses. "Oh wait, you've probably never played one before right? You don't have a circlet…"

I shake my head, and he shrugs. "It's okay, you don't *need* one to play it, I can project the screen and you can use that controller. You just won't get the full experience. But uh… do you want to?" He seems hesitant, shy once again.

I hurriedly nod. Joey said expressing interest in other people is a good way to make friends. "I will learn how to play this… sim game." I declare. My superior design will allow me to learn how to do anything!

Gaster smiles brightly, tapping a button on his circlet and then tapping a button on the controller. Another image floats in the air, and he sits down on the floor. I do so as well, watching the image in fascination. It is moving!

"Alright, this is called *Agency Heroes III.*" Gaster explains, moving sticks on his controller. The image changes, and I see pictures of different humans, nuans, and that other structure that looks similar to them but slightly different.

Oh, I recognize Crimson Flash!

"It's a fighting game, with different Agency members you can select to battle it out. Since you're new, I suggest choosing either Novastorm, Looper, or…" He trails off, smiling sheepishly as I look down at the controller in confusion. "Right, I should explain that first. Okay, so the left stick is how you select what character you want to play, and X is how you confirm it."

He points to a button and the stick. I nod, pursing my lips as I move over to the characters. Wait, I recognize this one…

"Mom?" I ask, pointing at the person who shows up on the screen when I hover over them, and Gaster looks a little uncomfortable.

"Yeah, that's my mom." He says, shifting. "She got added to the game

as DLC a couple of months ago. She's pretty good, but uh… could you *please* not pick her?"

Hmm… "Gaster, you seem to be embarrassed about this." I say, and his face goes red.

"Well… yeah." He admits. "She's really flirty in the game, and it's kind of awkward."

Well, if it will make Gaster uncomfortable, I will not do so. I choose another person, a male with very short hair. "Oh, that's Indigo. He's a little hard to learn, but his moveset is really good."

I nod, before confirming the choice. He chooses Crimson Flash, and I tilt my head as I hear pleasant sounds in the air. They form a regular pattern, and accelerate my heartbeat very slightly. Interesting, this must be how humans force their hormone production system to be ready for battle.

"Start!" A voice says, and I jump a little bit, accidentally hitting another button.

"Oh, you just hit pause. That's okay, I was going to explain how to play anyways." Gaster says, pointing at more buttons. "So if you press that, that's your light attack…"

-

I snarl, leaning forward as my fingers travel over the controller at high speeds. Light attack, heavy attack, jumping light into down heavy. But no matter what I do, the ***coward*** Gaster blocks them all, then does one grab attack to kill my character.

"You're way too aggressive with your playstyle." Gaster laughs, and I huff. "You don't block, like at all."

"I do not wish to continue playing this game." I grunt, turning away, and I can *hear* the smile in Gaster's voice as he speaks next.

"It's alright, you're still learning. You've only been playing for what, an hour? I have more time sunk into it than I want to admit." His tone is consoling, which only makes me more angry. The pup walks up to me, licking my face, and I turn away from it too. "It's alright, don't pout. Here, I can teach you about hit confirms next."

"I am *not* pouting!" I protest, but Gaster says he will teach me. So I grab the controller, and turn back to Gaster. "I *will* best you at this game. Even if…" Reluctant. "Even if you are superior at it now, I will win!"

Gaster laughs again, reaching over to grab another slice of pizza. He pushes over the box to me, and I also grab another slice. I decide to forgive Gaster, even if I can sense his smugness about beating me.

"So, how did you meet my dad anyways?" He asks, chewing, and I shrug.

"Joey hit me with his truck." I answer, and Gaster starts coughing, looking at me wildly.

"HE *WHA-"*

There's a knock at the door, and both me and Gaster turn. I push out my mind, sensing mom's mind from outside of the room. "Gaster?" She calls. I pause. There's something in her tone that reminds me of how Joey talked after I told him about my home. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, all good mom!" Gaster replies, glancing at me out of the corner of my eye.

The door opens and mom walks through it into the room. She has her arms wrapped around her stomach, and I see the corners of her eyes are red. A strange expression, but one I've seen Joey make before.

"Hey hun." She says, looking at Gaster. "I don't want to kick you out of your room, but do you think I could talk to… Joey, for a few moments?"

Gaster nods, grunting as he stands up. Waffles whimpers, tail low as he curls up next to me. It is okay Waffles, mom may be a predator, but I think she won't harm us! I think.

"Did dad tell you he hit Joey with his truck?" He asks, and I can hear concern in his voice. Mom bites her lip.

"He did, and… he told me a little bit more than that." She whispers. Gaster scratches his cheek, then walks past her, closing the door behind him.

Mom looks hesitant about something, but she sits down on the bed and pats the seat next to her. "Joey, could you come sit down for a little bit?"

I scratch Waffles around his ears. Though I think she won't hurt us, I still remember the **fear** she had instilled in us. But Joey is a nice human, so I think he would also mate with someone who is nice. I stand up and walk over, sitting on the bed next to her.

She doesn't say anything for a little bit, just bites her lip. Then her mouth opens. "Joey - er, not you Joey, my husband Joey, told me about where you came from." She says, and I nod.

"Ah, you are talking about home?" I ask, and she shakes her head, her face turning angry.

"That is *not* a home." She snaps, and I flinch, reflexively bringing out my tentacles. She looks at them, but her expression isn't wary. Just… sad.

"Sorry, I must have startled you. You can put your tentacles away, I'm not going to hurt you. I promise." She says, and I nod. Breaking your promises would be cowardice, and a **predator** cannot be a coward. I store my tentacles back into the gland I'd developed. "Joey told me that where you were kept before, *they* would hurt you?"

I remember the **pain**. The cycles and cycles of **pain**, and nod again. Her lips tremble, and she wraps her arms around me. I bristle, NO TOU-

But I stop. Confusion. I hate touch, but this is… pleasant.

I feel warmth inside of me. It must be a reaction of the human anatomy.

"You can stay here as long as you like." Mom whispers, grooming my hair with her hand. "*This* is a home, Joey. A home you can feel safe in. We aren't going to hurt you, ever."

I close my eyes. The grooming feels nice.

"Okay."

Chapter 30: Category Six

A note from Sonkoso

Heya everyone!

I haven't done one of these in a while, but an interesting little factoid I learned while researching medicine for this chapter.

So I'm sure most of us have heard of penicillin. The breakthrough in the discovery of anti-biotics. It, like most great things (especially chocolate chip cookies), was discovered completely by accident! Basically, in 1928 Dr. Alexander Fleming had left bacteria growing on a petri dish when he went on holiday. When he came back, he found penicillium mold growing on the petri dish. When he looked closer, he found that the area around the mold was completely devoid of bacteria.

Well, the interesting thing here is that despite his great discovery, the science community didn't believe in it for the better part of a decade! He and a team of chemists tried to purify penicillin from its mold, but were never successful. His research was shelved, until two more scientists by the names of Howard Florey and Ernst Chain found his research. They were successful in their attempts to purify it. The problem they continued to run into, though, was that the amount of mold it took to make even a fingernail amount of penicillin was astronomical.

After five years of continued of research and countless trials and errors, they perfected the process and penicillin was made readily available by the US in time for WWII, saving countless lives.

Anyways, hope you enjoy the chapter! Link to the article is here: https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/how-was-penicillin-developed#:~:text=1928%20to%201929,chemical%20that%20could%20kill%20bacteria.

"They are not going to cut me?" I ask, hesitant. The car we are in is stopped outside of a *big* building, the 'Doctor's Office'. Mom shakes

her head, her smile back. Her hair is different from Gaster's and Joey's, thick and with… braids, she called them.

"No, Joey, they're not going to cut you." She assures me. I hum, uneasy, but eventually agree. Joey had 'errands' to run, so mom said she would take me to everything we needed to do. To comply with the blue boys, we still had to talk to the Bounty Agency, but mom said we needed a recent physical examination first. Also, a circlet.

I am excited to get this circlet. I wish to take pictures!

"Okay. I am prepared." I say, and Waffles yips in my lap. Mom gently takes him into her arms, and Waffles begins to lick her face, which causes her to laugh. Mom has a nice laugh, and Waffles has gotten over the **fear** she had instilled in us before.

"Alright JJ," she says, what she had taken to calling me, "let's get to it." She puts on 'sunglasses', and a 'hat'. We both open our doors, and step outside. Her car is smaller, but much more comfortable than Joey's!

I flatten my ears, as it becomes far more loud than it was in the car. There are lots of voices, and people are all around us. Cars drive past us on the road, with *big* buildings towering over us. I feel small, insignificant, which makes me uncomfortable.

Mom gestures for me to follow, as people walk around us in large groups, entering the building and leaving it. I lick my lips, the overwhelming urge to ***devour*** filling me. But I promised Joey I would not eat people, so I follow mom as she walks towards the building. Waffles squirms in her arms, his own ears flat and his nose sniffing the air.

The doors slide open, and the area inside is somehow even louder then outside. I look up, moving stairs leading to different, higher sections of the building. Mom however, ignores everything and walks up to a big desk with several humans and nuans talking to people. I stand beside her, and mom holds my hand.

Pleasant.

Wiggle.

The human who greets us is female, with short pink hair. She smiles, looking between me, mom, and Waffles. "Hello!" She says, her voice very friendly. "Do you have an appointment with one of our offices, or is this a walk in?"

"I called earlier on the phone, for an appointment with Doctor Farley." Mom replies, and the female nods, tapping on something in the air. I look curiously, but don't see what she is interacting with. Oh, but her circlet is glowing green!

"Ah yes, the three o'clock for Mrs. Brooke Gruschwald?" She asks, and mom nods.

"Yep, that's me! Though I'll also need an appointment with an RE Veterinary Office, for this little girl." She says, holding up Waffles who yips excitedly, straining out of her arm to lick the female. Mom's grip is tight though, so Waffles ends up only licking the air. The female laughs.

"Hey girl! Boy she's friendly, isn't she?" She greets, then resumes typing on the air. "Alright, it looks like we have a few slots open today. Would four work for you?"

"Yep, that should work perfectly, thank you so much."

The female nods again, before tapping her circlet. She looks at me, still smiling. "I see he doesn't have a circlet. Would you like to register for a new neural plant today as well with Dr. Farley?"

Mom gently squeezes my hand. "Not yet." She says, and I frown.

"But the circlet!" I protest, and mom shakes her head, bending down to whisper into my ear.

"A neural implant involves an incision." She murmurs, and when she notices my confused look, purses her lips. "A cut."

Oh. I vigorously shake my head, and the female nods.

"Alrighty. I've just sent you a few forms to fill out, and if you

wouldn't mind taking either the escalator or the elevator to the third floor, someone will call for you shortly."

Mom nods, pulling my hand and we walk away to step onto the moving stairs. Another fascinating human invention, it conserves biomass, even if only slightly. "Mom, if…" I trail off as I see mom staring at me, her eyes going wide behind her sunglasses. "What?"

Mom shakes her head, smiling as her eyes grow a little wet. "Nothing hun. You can call me mom if you want to."

I frown, tilting my head. "Is that not your name?"

She opens her mouth, then closes it, before she laughs again. I must be amusing, people laugh a lot when I talk.

"No JJ, my name is Brooke." She clarifies, and I finally understand. Gaster called her mom because that was his term for Creator. "Did you think my name was mom?"

I nod hesitantly, and Brooke laughs again. "It's okay." She says quietly, still smiling and squeezing my hand. "You can call me mom if you'd like."

I think about this for a few moments. I was used to referring to her as mom, but… "Would it make you uncomfortable if I called you mom?" I ask hesitantly, and she shakes her head.

"No hun. It's more than okay." She answers, and I nod.

Mom. The feeling is pleasant.

Wiggle.

We step onto another area, the 'third floor', and mom lets go of my hand as we walk to a couple of chairs. People are sitting and standing around, a couple looking at us curiously. They smile when they see Waffles, then return to their own things. Just as we are about to sit down, a bald male in blue clothes walks out of a set of doors, looking around for a few moments.

"Brooke Gruschwald?" He calls, and mom readjusts her hold on

Waffles.

"Come on, that's us. Now Joey said that you don't like being touched, but they're going to have to, alright?" She asks, and I nod. As long as they don't attempt to cut me. I shudder as I remember the physical examinations the Creator conducted.

"Hello, if you wouldn't mind following me."

We fall in step behind the male, who leads us past the doors and down a hallway. We enter a room with two chairs against a wall, and a longer, strange looking chair in the middle of the room. I frown.

I don't like the 'Doctor's Office'. It feels like the bad room, where parts of my body were removed. But mom said I would be safe.

"Alright, did you fill out the forms?" The male asks mom, who nods and taps her circlet. The male also taps his circlet, looking into the air for a few moments. "Okay, looks like we've got a… BA physical exam?"

Mom nods. "Yup! JJ was never registered, so we were hoping to do that today." The male nods, smiling as he looks at me.

"Alright then, you can have a seat ma'am. JJ, if you wouldn't mind sitting on the examination bed, we'll go ahead and get started." The male gestures towards the long chair in the center of the room.

I comply, and he brings out a small device. He holds it against my arm for a few moments, nodding as he taps on the air. He then presses it to my neck, and I barely stop myself from growling. I push out my mind, sensing the male's thoughts. The neck is a weak spot in human anatomy, but… it will be okay. I do not sense any intention to harm from his thoughts. I pull my mind back.

He nods, then holds his hands up. "Alright, your temperature is abnormally high. Do you feel sick at all? Light headed?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"I increased the blood flow in my vascular system, and altered my heat transfer design." I say helpfully. "I should be twenty percent hotter than a standard human anatomy."

The male raises his eyebrows, before nodding. "Alright, so a result of your mutation. I suppose it's within normal-"

"I am not mutated." I interrupt, frowning. Mutations were the *inferior* form of Gifted, as Joey said. I have had my Core since my creation!

The male's eyebrows raise, and so do mom's. He looks at me curiously, studying my ears and tail. "It's okay, some people are in denial about their mutations for the first year or so, it's a normal psychological res-"

"I am *not* mutated." I insist, and mom purses her lips.

"But JJ, your ears and tail. And your tentacles, they are all signs of mutation." She says patiently, and I finally understand.

"I developed the canine auditory nervous system, and the caudal terminal appendage, to improve upon the human anatomy. And tentacles are superior additions to combat. Very versatile." I clarify, and they both look confused for a few moments.

"Could you demonstrate, please?" The male asks, and I shrug, complying.

[Remove canine auditory nervous system, develop human auditory nervous system, remove caudal terminal appendage]

I frown as my senses become lesser, and shift uncomfortably, holding my hands out to my side to steady my sudden lack of balance. Hmm… I should perhaps become used to balancing without a tail. If it is ever crippled during combat, I will suffer moments of weakness before I can repair it.

Mom and the male's expression's have become different. Interest, in the male's case, while mom's is… excited.

"JJ, you're Gifted?" She asks, her smile bright, and I nod.

"I have had my Core since my creation, yes." I say happily, and allow them to bask in my superior form's presence. "These changes were made recently, to better assist in combat."

Mom's smile dims, her eyes darkening. "Oh… I see…" She says. Oh, an interesting new expression. Like a mix between sadness and concern.

"Hmm…" The male nurse hums. "Well, in that case, I don't think there is a need for further physical examination."

Mom nods slowly, scratching Waffles around the ears, who pants happily. "No point for a complete Category One?" She asks

The male taps his circlet. "Right. Doctor Farley will be here momentarily. It was nice meeting you both." He says, nodding his head before walking out. When it is just the two of us in the room, I look at mom.

"Mom, what is a category one?" I question, and she smiles.

"Well, you'll learn more about them in depth at school… shoot, which starts in a couple of weeks. We'll have to get you enrolled." She taps her circlet. "Joey? Hey, could you swing by Gaster's new school while you're… oh, thanks sweetie. I guess you already thought about it. I love you too, I'll see you later." She returns to looking at me, while I stare jealously at her circlet.

It even allowed her to communicate with Joey at such a large distance? Maybe… maybe I could take a *little* cut…

"Sorry hun. Where was I? Right, Cat One. So, people with Cores have abilities. But each ability is different. Well not all the time, a lot of people have the same or very similar abilities, but anyways. These abilities are varied, but generally they fall into different archetypes." I nod along as she explains, eager to learn.

"Well, these archetypes are called Categories. Cat one is what we refer to as body modification and shapeshifting. They allow the Core User to alter their bodies to produce various effects. Some are only partial, like being able to transform their arms into weapons, or their blood into poison, things like that. Others, like yours, are more complete."

I hum, processing this. But I have another question. "So if someone

has more than one Core abi-"

The door opens, interrupting me, and we both turn to look at a nuan woman with pale grey hair entering the room. She has the same structures on her face that Gaster does, 'glasses'. She has on a white coat, strange devices hanging outside of her 'pockets'. She looks at me, then at mom.

"Brooke! It's so good to see you, it feels like it's been forever." She greets happily, and mom smiles widely. Her voice is different from humans, strangely. It is slightly more pleasant, like the 'music' that came from Gaster's game.

"Hey Evelyn. It has! Oh, Joey was thinking of hosting a barbie next week. Can I count on you wrangling up the gang to bring them?" Mom asks, and I realize they are friends!

"You most certainly can. Anything we should bring?" She asks, taking a device out of her pockets and bringing it up to me. "Hey buddy, what's your name?"

I smile. If she is a friend of mom, then she must be a good nuan. "My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!" I greet, and she laughs.

"Joey huh, that's a funny little coincidence." She hums, and Mom nods.

"I've taken to calling him JJ, Joey Junior. It helps a bit." She says, and Evelyn's smile widens.

"Well alright then JJ, I'm just going to have you look at this light right here." She says, and I comply as a red light flashes in my vision. "Good, good. Alright, and the other eye… very good." She turns to look at mom. "So, I see he doesn't have a circlet. The receptionist downstairs said that you weren't interested in getting him a neural implant?"

Mom nods hesitantly, looking at me. "JJ had a… rough, childhood. He doesn't do well with being touched or cut." She explains.

I think about the circlet. About the pictures, and the games, and the calls.

"I…" I say, taking a deep breath. I must not show cowardice! "I will allow myself to be cut, if it means I can acquire this circlet."

Mom looks at me with surprise, while Evelyn nods. "That's very brave of you, JJ." She says softly, and I smile. Evelyn is a nice nuan. She has acknowledged my lack of cowardice! She turns to look at my mom, opening her mouth, and I push my mind out. I am curious what a nuan's mind feels li-

Predator.

I freeze, the **fear** coming back as I observe the new woman, Evelyn. She has stopped, looking at me curiously, though a small smile is on her face. A *terrifying* smile.

"Well, that's interesting." She says quietly, and Mom looks between me and Evelyn in confusion. I shift, lowering my eyes.

"What is? JJ, what's wrong?" She asks worriedly, and Waffles whines. They can't sense it. This woman is even more of a ***predator*** than mom is.

I hear Evelyn's voice come, more gentle. "It's okay JJ, I'm not going to hurt you." She promises, and I look up fearfully. The **terror** is gone, but I know I only have to push my mind out again to feel it. It is strange. When Mom didn't have any intention to harm, even when I observed her with my mind, the **instinct** did not warn me that she was a predator. But this woman…

Evelyn is still smiling, and her posture is non-threatening. Mom continues to look concerned, and Evelyn glances at her. "The nurse that was just in here, Mike. He said that JJ was a cat one?" She asks, and Mom nods hesitantly. Evelyn's eyes crinkle as her smile widens, and she looks back at me. I swallow.

"Well, that might be a bit incorrect." She says, putting her hands in her pockets. "I think JJ here, like me, might be a Category Six."

Chapter 31: The Academy Trials

"Category six?" I ask, tilting my head. Evelyn nods, her smile still present.

"Yes." She confirmed, taking a hand out of her pocket and raising it, along with one finger. "Each category represents a different archetype of ability. I won't go into detail about what those categories are, I'll let other more qualified people handle that. But generally, Core users have one or two abilities that fall into one category." She raises her second finger, then a third "Category six, however, is what we call entities that have multiple abilities that fall into multiple categories."

I nod. Though I am very curious what the other categories are, I decide I will ask mom about them later.

"Now, category sixes are very rare. *Very* rare. The odds that there are two in the same room together, without extenuating circumstances like a war council of course, are about the same odds as gathering two randomly selected people from Stillera and Earth, and finding out that they are siblings." She puts her hand in her pockets, shrugging. "And yet, here we are."

Mom grooms Waffles, while I think about this seriously. What she said is truly something to ponder. "So as expected… I am truly superior?"

Evelyn stops, her eyes widening and her mouth opening and closing a few times. Then she laughs, the sound bright and clear, and mom puts a hand on her face. I blink, looking between them both.

Finally she stops laughing, wiping her eyes. "JJ, I'm not supposed to show any preference as a doctor," She begins, smiling, "but I think you might just be my new favorite person."

I smile. Happy. Of course I would be the favorite, I am superior after all.

Wiggle.

Evelyn looks at mom, shaking her head and still laughing a bit. "Alright Brooke, he's cleared for BA registry. Now, let's see about getting him a modified implant and a circlet, huh?"

-

I stare dazedly at the air in front of me, tapping thing after thing in my vision. Though I didn't understand the squiggles under each picture, I somehow *knew* what they were, my circlet telling me. The feeling is similar to the **instinct**, but a little different.

"Alright hun." Mom says, stopping the car. I look outside and see a big building, even bigger than the doctor's office. There are so many people outside! And a lot of them have different anatomies compared to a normal human. Some have additional arms, or ears and tails. Some don't even look like any structures I recognize, their skin a different material entirely. I lick my lips.

I hope one of them attacks me. Justifiable reason to eat, even if only a little bit because I promised Joey.

"JJ." Mom says patiently, and I turn to look at her guiltily. She couldn't have known what I was thinking, right? "Do you remember what I told you to say to the registry official?"

I nod. "I am here to register my identity and Core." I recite, and she smiles.

"And when they ask you why it took you so long to register as a Gifted individual?"

"I lived in a border settlement without access to a registry office." I say, a bit more hesitant. This is also not *technically* a lie. Mom pats my head, while Waffles snores in the back seat. She had entered stasis after its return from the 'Veterinary Office'.

"Very good." She compliments, and I *wiggle* in response. Affirmations are very pleasant! "Now, I've got to run a few more errands, so just

call me when you're done. Do you remember how to do that?"

I nod again, and she pats my leg. "Good." She looks around for a few moments, seeming to just now realize how many people there were. She taps her circlet, then hums to herself. "I'd forgotten there were Academy Trials today…"

That was another new term. "Academy?" I question, and she continues to look around, pursing her lips. She looks at me, then at the crowd of people.

"It's where people who want to apply to the BA and RCO go to, if they qualify." She says quietly, smiling. "I'm a graduate myself. Those were good times, but…" She hums again, then takes a deep breath. "Okay JJ. If you are asked to take the Trials, say no. At least for now."

Hmm… "Why?" I ask curiously, and mom purses her lips.

"I don't want you to go fighting-"

Fight!? I *love* fighting!

"-quite yet." She says, though when she sees my expression, she shakes her head. "I mean it JJ. Say no. At least, not yet."

I frown. I am reluctant to agree. She implied being in the Academy would lead to fighting! But mom seems to be concerned for me, so I sigh.

"Okay." I grumble. "I will say no."

She smiles, ruffling my hair. Pleasant.

"Alright, good luck hun. I'll see you soon!" She calls as I open the door, waving. I wave back, and step out of the car.

I had redeveloped the previous structures, and I flatten my ears again as the *loudness* of the crowd filters into my auditory nervous system. Mom drives away, and I take a deep breath.

There are so many pleasant scents!

I put my hands in my pockets and shuffle through the crowd. When I enter the building, though, I am surprised when I realize how quiet it is, despite there being so many people. There is some quiet talking, but other than that, everyone sitting in the chairs is quiet.

Mom said to 'wait in line', so I do so, standing behind an adolescent human with wings on his back, tucked in tight. Oh! He has also recognized the useful capability of the wing structure!

"I like your wings! Very efficiently structured." I compliment, and the human jumps a little bit, turning around to look at me. It is a male with long pale hair, 'blonde' Gaster had informed me.

"Um… thank you." He says, smiling slightly. His voice is quiet, and I realize I may have spoken too loudly compared to the other humans here, because they are looking at me strangely. "They're a part of my mutation." He studies me for a few moments, and I puff up proudly as I display my superior form. "I like your ears."

I flick them, smiling happily. He has recognized the change to the anatomy!

"My name is Joey Waffles! What is yours?"

"Oh, I'm Zack. Zack Eleros." He holds out a hand, and I stare at it for a few moments, confused. I look at him, tilting my head, and he awkwardly pulls his hand back. He clears his throat, his face going red. Embarrassment, recognize that expression. But why? "Are you here for the Academy Trials too?"

I shake my head, sighing sadly. "No, mom said I can't." I grumble, and he nods his head sympathetically.

"I get it. My mom was also against it. Thankfully my dad convinced her, said that I could at least try." He shifts on his feet, walking forward as the line moves, and I follow. "Honestly though, I don't know if I'll be able to make it. I'm only class one."

I tilt my head curiously. "Class one?" I ask, and he nods, sighing.

"Yeah. My friend over there though," Zack points at another human further in the line, "he got lucky, his mutation put his Core at class

two."

I nod slightly, still confused. But Zack talks about these… classes, as if they are common knowledge. I decide to ask mom about it later. "So what class are you? If your mom said you can't, probably class one like me right?" He asks, smiling.

Oh, I remember what the blue boy had said! "I am class four." I answer, and he nods along.

"Right, yeah I fig-" He freezes, staring at me with wide eyes. "Cl- class FOUR!?" Oh, he said that very loudly!

People glare at us, and he winces as his face goes red again. He purses his lips, squinting at me. "No, but really, what class are yo-"

"I can help the next person." A male human at the desk calls, interrupting Zack. He looks at me strangely for a few moments, before turning back around and walking forward to the male. Hmm…

Was being class four a good or bad thing?

Well, it is a higher number, so it must be superior!

Wiggle.

Ah, a male nuan is waving at me from the desk. I walk forward, and he smiles.

"Hello there. Are you here for registration, or Academy Trials?" He asks, and I sigh again.

"Registration…" I huff reluctantly, and he nods, smiling.

"Okay then, I'll just need your circlet ID and your recent physical examination papers." He says, tapping his circlet. I jump when I see a… request pop up in my vision. Okay, mom showed me how to do this, I just have to click that and…

"Alright, thank you very much." He says, his voice also pleasant to listen to like Evelyn's. Maybe it is a feature of the nuan anatomy, to have a voice like music? "Mr. Joey Waffles… Waffles?"

I nod. "That is me!" I confirm, and he looks at me strangely. What? It is a perfectly good name!

"Well, Mr. Waffles, it says here that you're fourteen." My mom had told Evelyn I was that age, since I didn't know. "1.67 meters, 98 kilograms, and category… category six…" He trails off, looking at me dazedly. I nod.

"That is also correct!"

I hear slight coughing, and turn to see Zack staring at me with wide eyes, before he notices me looking and quickly turns away. Strange.

The nuan shakes his head, clearing his throat. "Okay Mr. Waffles, it says here that you are Gifted." More coughing from the side. "May I ask why you are only just now registering with us?"

Oh, just like mom said. "I lived in a border settlement before this, with no access to a registry office." I recite, and the nuan nods.

"Alright, if you wouldn't mind staying still for just a few moments, I'm going to run a quick scan to see what class you are." He says, pulling out the same device the blue boys had used.

Beep!

He looks at it for a few moments, his brows furrowing.

"Sorry, it looks like there might have been a slight mistake." He murmurs, holding it up again.

Beep.

One of the other people at the desk looks him curiously, walking over. "What's wrong Adi-" He begins to ask, then pauses. The nuan shakily raises his scanner once more. Okay, perhaps something is wrong.

Beep.

"Class… class four." He whispers, looking at me up and down while the other person does the same.

I flick my ears, looking at the two people. "Is something wrong?" I ask, and they slowly shake their heads.

"No, no, nothing's wrong." The nuan hurriedly says in a tone that definitely makes me feel like something is wrong, tapping on the air. His smile is big though, and he looks at me expectantly. "Mr. Waffles, would you like to take the Academy Trials?" He asks.

I scowl, but reluctantly shake my head. "No." I mutter.

He looks at me, slightly taken aback. "Are you certain? You would do well in them, I'm certain." I know! I am displeased with mom too! I am about to shake my hea-

Wait.

Wait wait wait.

I *said* no. That is what I promised. That I would say no.

But I already said no, so my promise with mom has been fulfilled. It is not *technically* a lie!

"Actually, I *would* like to take the Trials." I confirm, and the nuan nods, his smile back. He taps his circlet, gesturing to a hallway.

"Very well, then please go down that hall and make the first right." He says, and I nod, turning around and walking away. I see Zack staring at me with his mouth open, and I wave. Goodbye friendly human Zack!

I will pass these Trials! For a superior life form such as myself, how hard could it be?

Lycia Orer, alias Novastorm, yawns loudly as she rests her chin on the palm of her hand. She can sense the disapproval from her fellow judges beside her, but she couldn't care less. This candidate was an

utter disappointment in the combat Trial. He pants, trembling as he holds a wounded arm. A standby medic holds a hand to the lacerations on his shoulder and forearm.

"Two marks." She says while staring down at him from her seat at the table on the high walls surrounding the Arena, and her fellow judges nod along with the assessment. The candidate pales, his expression pleading.

"Please, one more try!" He begs, and the judge next to her shakes his head.

"That will be all, Mr. Ivanov." Michael Passieur, alias Thunder Step, says unsympathetically. The candidate, now fully healed, takes a step forward in the Trial arena.

"I can do it, just one more-"

"Mr. Ivanov." Michael interrupts him, frowning in disapproval. "That will be all. Please exit the arena."

For just a few moments it looks like he's about to protest further, but the finality in Michae's tone seems to have gotten to him. Hanging his head dejectedly, he slowly shuffles out of the combat arena, and Lycia yawns again.

She smirks as she notices her friend being shaken awake by the judge next to him, and he looks around wildly.

"Wha- what is it?" Gael Jónsson, alias Bloodhound,asks while looking around wildly. When he notices the corpse of the Mutated Entity being lifted up by a BA employee and carried away, he scrubs his face with his hands. "Ah damn, I fell asleep didn't I? Why did that guy just keep running away?"

"The kid looked like he was about to start crying when he heard you snoring." Lycia snickered, and Michael glanced at her, sighing.

"Would it kill you two to conduct yourselves *somewhat* professionally?" He mutters, and Lycia nods gravely.

"It would. I might seriously die of boredom." She says, Gael snorting a

laugh while Michael pinches the bridge of his nose. Lycia stifles another yawn, arching her back in a stretch before she turns to the judge who had yet to speak

"Hey Marie, how many more do we have left?" She asks. Though she was soon to be a guest instructor at the Academy, and thus a judge for its candidates, the entire affair was rather dull. So far only three had passed the combat Trial, arguably the most important one.

Marie Laurely, alias Biohazard, swiped through the air. "Just three. The next one is Joey… Joey *Waffles?"*

Lycia blinks for a few moments, before eagerly checking her own circlet's schedule. "There's no way his name is *actually* Waffles, right?" She asks, but sure enough, there he is. She laughs, leaning forward over her desk to look at one of the employees with a grin.

"What are you waiting for? Get that guy in here, I *have* to see what he looks like." She calls out, and the employee nods, walking out of the large arena. Gael and Michael are both looking at his file with interest.

"Says here he's a cat six." Gael says with a low whistle. "And class *four*? Where has this kid *been*."

Michael studies the file, his brows furrowing. "Failing every Trial possible, it would seem." He remarks, and Lycia shakes her head as she too sees the result.

"Gun range, two hits out of twenty." She begins. "Rift Entity identification, six out of fifty. Knowledge test, twenty one percent… wait, this mother fucker just put C for everything!" She bursts out into laughter.

Marie reads the Trial administrator notes. "Repeatedly asked other people questions during the knowledge test, complete disregard for gun safety with multiple counts of flagging, asked if it was possible to eat the Rift Entities displayed on the hologram…" Her eyes widen, and Gael chuckles.

"Looks like the only reason he wasn't outright kicked out is because

he's a class four. Which, you know, fair enough." He hums, and everyone quiets as the doors to the arena open. Each judge wears a different expression, Lycia with eagerness to see just *who* this Joey Waffles was, Michael's frown of displeasure, Marie's look of concern, and Gael's smirk.

And when they see who enters…

Chapter 32: Monstrous Capability

Lycia tilts her head. He looked… normal. Well, maybe a bit less than normal, but certainly not the figure she had built up in her mind. The kid looked between twelve and fourteen, and was well below average height. He was good looking enough for a kid, she guessed, with shaggy brown hair, clear black eyes and a bright smile on his face. He was wearing clothes that were a couple of sizes too big for him, and his tail wagged behind him.

"Hello!" He greets happily, looking up at them. "My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!"

He's like a puppy. Lycia thinks to herself, amused. *Just happy to be here.*

"Hello, Mr… Waffles." Michael greets back, hesitating on the name. "You've been informed that this is the last Trial, the Combat Trial?"

Joey nods vigorously. "I was told I would get to fight?"

Gael and Lycia glance at each other, the former raising an eyebrow. *Get to?* He mouths and Lycia shrugs, while Michael nods. "That is correct. As you are a class four, you will be facing a class three entity. Your safety is guaranteed, though you may sustain injury. We have a medical team on standby and will be ready to take action if your life is deemed to be in danger. However, if it is deemed necessary for us to intervene, it is an automatic failure of the Trial. Though should you succeed, the Core of the entity you kill is yours. Are you prepared?"

Joey nods once again, and Lycia pauses as she sees a cloud of tentacles slither out from Joey's back. Each one is lined with serrated, barbed teeth, as well as dozens of eyes that roam around the arena.

Interesting.

Lycia notices everyone else has leaned forward as well, clearly intrigued by the tentacles and no doubt wondering about the categories that Joey belonged to. In all her time as a Bounty Agent,

she had only ever met two other category sixes. Crimson Flash, someone who completely eclipsed her in terms of power, and…

"Very well. Release the Mutant." Michael declares, and soundlessly a door opens from the other side of the arena. A mutant mountain lion prowls forward, its fur bristling as it sees Joey. Lycia studies his expression, expecting to see at least a hint of nervousness, and does a double take.

She could have sworn he just licked his lips.

The two figures in the ring, man and beast, circle around each other. Joey's ears swivel as the mountain lion begins to stalk forwards. His tentacles fan out around him, each eye opening wide as they stare directly at the mutant. For a few moments, it reminds Lycia of a mix between a peacock and a blooming flower.

The mutant's ears press flat against its head and it hisses, yowling as its fur bristles. Its gaze darts between each eye on the tentacles and it backs away slowly.

When Joey corners it against the wall of the arena, the mutant has nowhere to go but forward. And it does so, fire erupting from its paws as it leaps towards him in a pounce. Joey doesn't even move, his tentacles exploding forward with blinding speed and wrapping around the mutant mid-leap. It shrieks for just a moment before a sickening *crack* resounds in the air, the mountain lion going limp in the tentacles' grasp. They then twist, serrated teeth slicing through mutant muscle as if it were tofu, ripping it in half and showering the arena floor with blood and gore in a visceral display of power.

Joey's tentacles blanket the two halves of the mutant mountain lion, and as the sound of wet squelching meat and crunching bone echoes in the air, the judges watch in morbid fascination when they realize that the tentacles are *devouring* the mutant.

"Thanks doc!" Joey calls happily. Lycia hadn't been mistaken, she realizes, as she sees him lick his lips again. His tentacles twist around each other and retract back into an unseen part of his body. The only remains left of the mutant are the blood splatters quickly drying on the ground. Not even its Core can be seen.

The judges look at each other, a mixture of horror and astonishment on each of their expressions. Until finally, Lycia's smile gradually grows, and she turns back to Joey. "Full marks!" She exclaims, while Joey tilts his head in confusion.

Her fellow judges slowly nod along with the assessment, and Michael laces his fingers together as he leans forward. "Well done, Mr. Waffles. Very well done. Summarily brutal, but extremely efficient. You pass the-"

"Wait." Gael holds up a hand, and Lycia notices the play of a smile on his lips. "A class four easily dispatching a class three is no surprising thing." The other judges look at him warily, while he rests his cheek on his hand. "Don't we have a class four Rift Entity for this exact event, courtesy of Androtech?"

Michael seems to catch the implication, a frown of displeasure crossing his features. "You can't possibly mean to test Joey with it? He's already done far better than the other candidates."

Lycia mirrors Gael's body language, her own smile widening. "I believe we do, actually." She replies lazily, while Michael turns a glare on her. "I must admit, I'm interested to see how a mutual class battle would play out."

Michael lets out a sigh of exasperation. "You both-"

"I would like to observe this test as well." Marie says quietly, both Lycia and Gael raising their eyebrows in surprise. They hadn't been expecting to find an ally in Marie, but they were welcome to it. "I will personally step forward if there is any indication of danger."

Michael opens and closes his mouth, fury on his features, before he slams the table with a fist. But the trio wears him down silently with their expectant gazes, and he lets out a long, pent up breath, his features going blank. "You three will be the ones to answer for this if it goes wrong."

Gael fist pumps the air, turning to look back at Joey, who had been watching the four judges with mild curiosity. "Alright Mr. Waffles, there will be a second phase to the Trial. You will be facing a class

four entity this time. If you feel you are in danger at any point, say so and we will step in to stop it. Do not worry, failure in this portion of the Trial will not affect your passing score."

Joey nods, his tentacles once more slithering out from behind his back and blooming in the air. *Mmm… More like a flower than a peacock*, Lycia decides with a smile. He licks his lips again, clearly eager. *Perhaps eating the entities he kills is a part of his Core Ability?*

Michael sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose before waving his hand. "Release the Entity." He calls, and once more the soundless sight of a door opening greets their vision.

Dark black fog roils out from the doorway, slowly blanketing the ground as it coils past Joey's ankles. He looks around at the fog suspiciously, his ears flattening against his head and a deep growl rumbling from his throat. The judges wait with baited breath, until a piercing shriek tears through the air.

A pitch black figure comes dashing out of the doorway, four yellow eyes locked onto Joey while two long arms that end in scythes scrape on the ground behind it, sparks flying out from their contact with the arena floor. But while they were distracted by the figure, only Lycia noticed Joey's form go through several changes.

First, his skin seemed to bulge outwards, then condense inwards. She could see the skin tightening around the cords of muscle now straining around his body, before it became layered with thick, chitinous plates of armor that gleamed in the light offered by the arena. The teeth on the tentacles retracted, the eyes closing as the edges of each tentacle become razor sharp.

These changes took place in mere moments, startling the other judges when they finally seemed to notice them. The Entity sliced towards Joey in a long, whipping arc. He ducked just as the scythe threatened to cleave him in two, bending backwards in an impressive display of flexibility. The entity sliced downwards with its other arm, perhaps hoping to catch him in his evasive maneuver.

Joey launched himself to the side, a few of his tentacles stabbing into the ground and forcefully twisting his body around to face the Entity

while the rest whipped forwards. Nearly two dozen tentacles converged around the Entity on all sides, before constricting around like a large net to slice it into ribbons. But just before the tentacles could make contact…

The Entity puffed into the same black fog that blanketed the Arena, leaving behind an echoing scream that faded into a cacophony of whispers. "A Mist Dancer." Gael hums, his eyes crinkling with his smile. "Now Mr. Waffles, how are you going to deal with this?"

Joey looks around, his tentacles sweeping the area in large arcs, slicing through the fog. But all it does is disperse it momentarily, before the black mist settles back onto the ground and curls upwards, hundreds of wispy fingers grasping for their next prey.

A rumbling growl sounds from Joey once again as his ears twitch this way and that, while he sniffs the air. Suddenly he leaps up and gracefully flips backwards, as the Entity reforms from the mist with a scream, its scythes already swinging towards Joey's previous position. His backwards jump places him directly above the Entity, and his tentacles stab into the ground all around it. The Dancer hurriedly glances up while Joey yanks himself downwards with his tentacles, its form dispersing just as Joey is about to crush it underneath him. Instead of flattening the Entity beneath him, Joey's armored knee cracks the ground of the Arena, the force of the strike creating small spider webbing fissures around the point of contact.

Gael whistles at the show of force, while Lycia's heart begins to thump in her chest. Michael looks as though he's on the edge of his seat, his expression teetering between panicked concern and fascination. Marie watches on with a placid face, though Lycia notices her hands tightening underneath the table.

The whispers grow menacingly louder, while Joey's ears continue to swivel. He rolls to the side as the Entity emerges with another shriek, its scythes slicing nothing but air. Joey's tentacles again explode forward, threatening to pierce the Mist Dancer, but *again* he's just a moment too slow.

Over and over this happens, Joey expertly evading the shrieking Entity's scythes, but being just a beat too slow to catch it. Though his

face is covered with chitinous armor, in a way that oddly resembles the power armor given to the RCO officers, Lycia can tell he is getting more and more irritated as time passes. His movements become more erratic, and every missed attack leaves his tentacles thrashing along the ground with rage.

Until, finally, the Mist Dancer catches him.

Lycia starts forward in a panic as the scythe strikes the armor on his side, but breathes a sigh of relief as she sees it bounce off. The armor cracks, but maintains its structure, though the force of the blow sends Joey tumbling to the side. The entity disperses into mist once more as he launches himself upwards with his tentacles, and then reappears to slash at his now exposed back, once again sending Joey skittering across the ground.

Michael looks as though he's about to step down into the arena, but Gael holds up a hand and Lycia looks at him questioningly. Truthfully, she was just about to launch herself down into the arena as well. His grin is still wide on his face, almost coquettish in nature. "Not yet." He says quietly, gesturing towards Joey. "Look. He's figured it out."

They both turn to look, and notice Joey's form is… *wiggling* slightly, on the ground. His tentacles hang limp, but the glow of his eyes is bright yellow beneath the visor of his chitinous mask. His ears continue to swivel and twitch, and his eyes suddenly snap to look at a certain point in the fog.

And sure enough, the Dancer emerges from exactly the place Joey is looking, scythes swinging downwards.

His tentacles erupt towards the Entity just as its scythe is about to make contact with his head, the Mist Dancer screeching in pain as dozens of tentacles pierce its body. They then begin to vibrate, the Entity thrashing in place as Joey springs to his feet and punches through its torso.

Joey's fist erupts out of the Entity's back, gore showering the arena as he wrenches his hand out and grabs the Mist Dancer's arms. With a savage snarl he rips both scythes out from their sockets, the Dancer

emitting a blood curdling shriek as dark fluid gushes from its stumps. Then he wraps it up into his arms while his tentacles tighten around it, and the Dancer wails, frantically kicking the air and squirming in his grasp.

But there is no escape from Joey.

His tentacles rip outwards from inside of the Dancer, cutting the screams short as the Entity falls into neatly sliced parts, collapsing to the ground with wet slaps of minced flesh. The mist fades away, while Joey's armor retracts into his body to reveal pale skin, the corded muscles relaxing their tension. And in Joey's hand is a shining purple Core, about the size of a baseball.

The judges look on in stunned silence, as Joey's tentacles cover the creature once more. With another echoing round squelching meat, Joey looks up at the judges with a bright smile on his face, his teeth pearly white compared to the dark blood staining his features.

"Thank you for the food!" He says happily, and Lycia erupts into a cheer, her heart thumping as her face flushes in excitement.

"FULL MARKS!" She squeals, girlishly ecstatic.

Gael chuckles to himself as he glances at his friend, resting his chin on a hand. Marie slowly claps her hands, letting out a shaking breath. Michael once again laces his fingers together, clearing his throat. He glances at Lycia, who hurriedly sits down, her face still flushed.

"Again, masterfully executed Mr. Waffles." He says in his even tone, though even he isn't immune to the slightest tremble of excitement in it. "We will inform you of our decision on whether or not to invite you to the Academy at a later date. Please exit the arena."

Joey nods emphatically, his tentacles once again contracting underneath his clothing. They are stained with blood, but otherwise remain undamaged as he walks out, burping loudly. The doors close behind him, and BA employees emerge from side rooms to mop up the remaining blood on the arena floor, pausing to look at the cracks and gouges in the ground left by Joey's battle.

Lycia puts a hand on her chest, her heart still pounding. "I haven't felt like this since *I* was class four." She breathes, fanning her face, and Gael smirks at her.

"Careful now. He's only fourteen, still a few years away from being legal." He teases, and Lycia flips him off.

"Shut it." She snaps, rolling her eyes.

Marie nods slowly. "He did very well." She says, and Lycia turns on her.

"Very *well*? That kid is fucking *monstrous!*" She exclaims, slapping her palm flat on the table. Her violet eyes gleam as she looks at her fellow judges and future instructors. "When he gets to the Academy, he is *mine.*"

Gael looks as though he's about to protest, but a sharp glare from Lycia causes him to close his mouth with an audible *snap*. Instead he only grimaces, genuine concern on his features.

"You know, I *was* only joking before, but…" He mutters, pursing his lips, but he receives only another glare in response.

"It is not a matter of when, but *if*." Michael corrects. "He failed every other Trial we have."

Lycia snorts in derision. "Please, it's *when* he's coming to the Academy. No way we're not recruiting raw talent like that." She then turns back to the front, placing her face in her hands with a considering smile. "Now, I have to think about what present I'll get for my cute new protégé."

Further down the hall, Joey feels a slight chill run down his spine. He warily looks around, but sensing no immediate danger, shrugs and continues walking.

Chapter 33: Smoke And Fire

The door chimed as the detective walked in, an old fashioned leather jacket barely concealing the lithe power armor covering his frame. A few people turned to look at him curiously from their booths, but when they recognized the familiar face they smiled and nodded a greeting. He nodded back, hands in his pockets as he waited for a waiter to see him.

He didn't have to wait long, as a lanky human man wearing a Jodie's uniform approached.

"Morning Cal." He said, an easy smile on his face. "You want your regular booth?"

Detective Caliban shook his head regretfully. He did his best to ignore the tantalizing scent of fresh morning coffee and fried ungal and waffles, instead taking a hand out of his pocket to rest it on his holster.

"Sorry Berry, not today." He said with a slight frown. "Is Jodie in?"

Berry paused, the detective's serious tone causing a prickling sense of unease to take hold of him. "She is, but she's working in the kitchen. Trouble?"

Detective Caliban shook his head again, the hand on his holster raising to scratch the light stubble on his chin. "Shouldn't be. Just had a few questions for her, that's all." He reassures Berry, who nods.

"I'll go get her then. In the meantime, could I get you a coffee? "

Caliban hesitated, but eventually a weary smile crossed his features. "Ah what the Rift, sure. I could use something hot right now."

Berry nodded, his smile back but the unease not quite leaving him as he turned around and headed toward the kitchen. After just a few moments he returned, gesturing towards a more private booth while handing the Detective a mug. "If you'll wait there, Jodie will be out to greet you shortly."

Detective Caliban took the mug gratefully, his hands warming as he walked over to the booth and slid into the cushioned seat. He raised the cup and blew on his coffee, steam curling upwards into his face as he took a sip.

Perfect as always, the Detective thought, relishing his drink. True to Berry's word, Jodie wandered out from the kitchen just a few moments after he had sat down, her gaze wandering over the shop before settling on Caliban in his booth.

Her black apron had small smudges of flour on it, a small detail Caliban noted as Jodie approached him. Her half-nuan half-human features were friendly in the way only an older person's could be, the small wrinkles around her eyes and on her forehead the only betrayal of her age on her otherwise pretty features.

"Good morning Cal." She greeted, dusting her fingers off on her apron. Her friendly smile was almost infectious, causing the corners of Caliban's lips to turn upwards. "How's the coffee hun? Brewed it myself this morning."

Caliban chuckled lightly, taking another small sip before setting the mug down on the coffee. "Still the best this side of Sacison." He assured her, but soon his smile settled. "Though I'm afraid I'm not here for coffee. I'm told Brias and Connel were here about a week and a half ago."

Jodie scowled, shaking her head. "Are those boys up to trouble again? I told 'em, I swear upon the Makers I told 'em to stay out of any-"

Detective Caliban held up a hand, shaking his head slightly. "They've gone missing.." He interrupted her, his voice quiet. She froze, her scowl morphing into a concerned frown.

"Oh." She said softly, the detective noting the way her hands nervously bunched at the edge of her apron. "How long ago?"

Caliban shrugged, resting his hand on top of his mug. "Not too long after they were last seen at your diner here, actually." He said, leaning his elbows on the table. "I spoke to Connel's wife, Yarina. She

said he came home after that, but left again shortly afterwards. Something about 'damn mutie's'. People have been talking about them getting into an altercation with two strangers here."

Jodie nodded absently, her brows furrowing. She pursed her lips, nervously looking around, before sliding into the booth across from him. "Well… honestly, a regular here came in about a week ago with a young boy. His name's Joey, he's a supply trucker that uses this route."

The detective pushed his mug to the side, subtly tapping his circlet to begin recording. "Joey, you said?"

Jodie nodded again. "Joey, yes. Big man, human with a beard. Run's supplies for Razor Corps. But the boy he had with him was mutated, and it was the first time I'd seen him. But Joey shouldn't have anything to do with it. He's good people, I know that much."

Caliban tapped his fingers on the counter, mulling things over. "I see. Any idea where him and the boy went to after?" He asked, catching Jodie's subtle glance behind him through the window.

"Well… yes. I told him to make sure his tires weren't slashed. You know how Brias and Connel get sometimes." She admits, and Caliban nodded regretfully. Too many times he'd had them down at his station. "Sure enough, I saw a truck come to take his semi out from the lot."

Caliban raised his eyebrows at that. "Only local person I know who could truck out a semi is Oscar. You think that's where they went?" He questioned, and Jodie nodded hesitantly.

"Looked like one of his vehicles." She confirmed for him, and Caliban stood up. He glanced at the coffee, then picked it up and drained it one last time, ignoring the slight burn on his tongue.

"Thank you." He said, and Jodie stood up as well. She was glancing around at the patrons who seemed to be listening in, before quickly returning to mind their own business. She leaned in close to the detective.

"Listen Cal, like I said, Joey is good people. And the boy was mutated, but he seemed sweet enough. Hungry, he cleaned three plates of food, but sweet." She whispered. "You don't think it could have been them, do you?"

Caliban shook his head. "I'm just trying to track this down any way possible." He replied, his voice hushed. "It wasn't just them who went missing. Three others did too."

Jodie looked troubled, but nodded. "Well then, I hope you find them boys. Brias and Connel are trouble makers sure, but I still hope they're alright."

Caliban patted her shoulder, than tapped his circlet, sending Jodie a few credits for the coffee as he walked away. He swiped the air, calling his station. "Hey, it's Caliban. We have a possible 722 at Oscar's garage. Please send Ronal and William to assist." He said, the door chiming once more as he walked out of the diner.

"Roger Detective, Ronal and Wiliam shall be there shortly to assist."

-

Detective Caliban was leaning against his unmarked cruiser with his arms folded across his chest , two more doors slamming closed from a marked police car as a nuan and a human in police uniforms stepped out of their vehicle.

"Morning Cal." Ronal called, hands hooked on his duty belt while William walked in step behind him. Their expressions were friendly but serious as they stopped a few feet away from Caliban, turning to look at Oscar's large garage. Inside of it they could hear the whir of machinery, as well as loud rock music drifting out into the air.

"Morning." Caliban greeted back, uncrossing his arms as he put his hands in his pocket. "Station drew you up to speed?"

William nodded, tapping his circlet. "Sure did. Code 722, Brias,

Connel, and three others?" He asked, and Cal nodded.

"Yep, last known locations were their homes and Jodie's diner." He confirmed, pushing off of his cruiser. William clicked his tongue.

"Guess you might be used to something like this, since you transferred here from Niminir." He said, and Ronal jabbed an elbow into his side. "Ow, what the hell was tha- oh, sorry Cal." His expression was regretful when he noticed the dark shadow pass over Caliban's face for just a moment, but the detective only shook his head.

"No, it's fine." He muttered, though Ronal and William could tell by his tone that it was anything but. "Anyways, I want you two to look around, see if you notice anything out of the ordinary."

Ronal nodded, dragging William with him as he started hissing something in his ear. Caliban paid it no extra attention, walking around to the front of the garage. Inside he could see a larger, bearded human man unscrewing bolts to a tire, rock music blaring as he wiped sweat from his brow.

"'Scuse me Oscar!" He called as he approached, and Oscar paused turning to look around at the detective. Grease stained his hands and smudged parts of his cheek, and as he tapped his circlet the rock music abruptly stopped, leaving silence in its wake.

Oscar's eyes narrowed slightly, before widening in surprise. "Oh, detective!" He exclaimed, a small smile on his face. But Caliban noted the slightest twitch in his cheek, and the way his eyes darted to the side. *Interesting.* "You finally brought your cruiser here to change out that relic you call an engine to something more practical?"

Caliban chuckled, shaking his head. "Afraid not. What you call 'practical' would put me out a few thousand creds." He says, and Oscar waves a hand.

"You can afford it, I'm sure. Would save you on fuel in the long run too. More efficient Core usage, I swear. Just can't beat the c10 engine." He said, setting down the tool in his hands and wiping grease on his jumper. "Well, if you're not here to have your fossil

changed into art, what *can* I help you with?"

The detective looked around the shop, then focused on Oscar. There were deep bags under his eyes, ones he hadn't had the last time Caliban visited him. From the puffiness of his cheeks he could tell that the mechanic had been drinking more than usual too. Filing away this information, Caliban rested his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

"A few local boys have gone missing." He says, carefully studying Oscar's expression. "Brias, Connel, a few others. Heard that some of them might have slashed up a trucker's tires, and that you towed it."

Oscar nodded warily, the detective noticing his eyes once again glance away. "Yeah, friend of mine actually. Took a day to get the right wheels out here." He said, his arms crossing over his front.

"Joey?" Caliban asked, and Oscar looked surprised that the detective knew the name.

"Yeah, that's him. Had him ready to go on the road by the morning, and he took off."

Caliban noted the defensive stance, the hesitation in his voice. And the lack of mention of the boy with him. "Jodie said that he might have had a mutant with him. Know anything about that?"

Oscar looked uncomfortable now, and Caliban knew he was hiding something. "Uh… yeah, he might have. He did, actually." Oscar hurriedly corrected, clearing his throat. "Kid was a little strange, but nothing other than that. Me and Joey shot the shit, cooked up some hot dogs and drank some beer. I might have given the kid one."

Just as Cal was about to press further, he saw Ronal come from around the side of the garage. "Detective, something you might want to see." He said, looking at Oscar before gesturing behind him. Cal stared at Oscar for a few moments, saw him shift uncomfortably, and followed Ronal.

As they walked around the side, Oscar followed behind them. Caliban noticed the slight cracks and indentions on the wall of the garage,

damage that wasn't present on any other part of the building. But that wasn't what they were talking about.

William was standing off to the side, his hands resting on his duty belt. All around Oscar's house and garage, the grass was vibrant green and neatly trimmed. All except for a large circle that William was standing outside of.

The grass in the circle was flat and grey, decayed when compared to the rest of the field.

He turned back to Oscar, who had gone almost as pale as the decayed grass. When Oscar noticed Caliban looking at him, he cleared his throat. "That's pretty strange." He noted, and Caliban nodded absently.

"That *is* pretty strange." He agreed, walking up to the decayed section of the grass. He hoped he was wrong. Hoped beyond hope that he was mistaken, as he laid a hand on the grass.

Instantly his head snapped upwards, as a vision played out in his mind. His Core blazed to life in his chest as his Ability activated. In the vision, he saw a writhing mass of darkness on this section of the grass. Just above him he could see the moon offering pale light around the area. He heard faint screams, followed by wet crunches and a dog's quiet whining. As the vision was old he couldn't make out specific details, but what he *did* see sickened him to his stomach.

He stood up, shaken, and glanced at Ronal and William. "If I remember correctly, there was a quarantine on a route that led through here to Mackadon, wasn't there?"

Ronal nodded, though Caliban knew that he didn't quite understand the implication. Local cops probably wouldn't recognize signs of Rift Entity exposure. Caliban turned to Oscar, an edge in his tone. "Oscar, could you describe the… *kid* that Joey was traveling with?"

Oscar's face paled further, if that was even possible, but he nodded. "I can uh… I can do a little better than that. I have a picture." He said, tapping his circlet. An image sprang into the air, of an even bigger man than Oscar laughing uproariously as a boy no older than

fourteen stomped on a can of beer, face twisted into a scowl. There were clear signs of mutation on him, with wolf ears and a tail. And in a makeshift pouch was a small wolf.

Caliban had heard a dog whining in his vision.

Caliban studied the image for a few moments, before nodding. "Thank you, Oscar. Now, I'm going to ask you this, and please answer me honestly. Do you know what happened to the missing people?"

Oscar hesitated for a few moments, before shaking his head. "No." He said resolutely, and Caliban sighed.

"... I see." Was all he replied with, turning around. "Ronal, William, thank you for your help."

He began walking away, the two police officers looking between each other hesitantly before hurriedly jogging to catch up to Caliban. "What is it?" William asked quietly, glancing over his shoulder at Oscar, who was watching them go with a complicated expression on his face.

"You know that old adage about smoke and fire?" Caliban asked, and the two officers nodded as he opened the door to his cruiser. The detective looked at them for a few moments, his jaw clenching. "Well, I think we might have just found our smoke. And I'm betting anything, that the quarantine is the fire."

He stepped into his vehicle, closing the door as he sank into the seat of his cruiser. After deliberating for a few moments, he tapped on his circlet. "Hey, Trudy? Yes, it's Caliban. Yes. Please patch me through to RCO, I have a few questions I'd like to ask."

Deep underground, a team of scientists in white lab coats milled around three separate vats of murky yellow liquid. The clear glass allowed them to see pulsating bundles of Rift flesh forming inside, shining purple Cores directing their growth.

"I still can't fucking believe that after everything that happened, we were cleared for more damn experiments with the x-series. Ah, apologies for my language." A woman with vibrant red hair in a tight bun whispered fiercely to a moderately handsome Nuan. The Nuan pushed up on his wire frame glasses, subtly glancing at an old man standing on a platform that oversaw the team working.

"Rose…" Devon warned, and the woman rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I know. Doctor Rester ensured full safety. But still…" She trailed off as one of the newer lab techs on their team jumped slightly, backing away from the vat they had been watching. The lab tech very quickly looked up at Doctor Rester, who studied the vat labeled X2 with a wide smile on his face.

Because in the vat, an eye had just formed to study everyone present.

Chapter 34: Invitation to the Academy

"Okay JJ, open your eyes and tell me what you think." Mom says, and I do so. She had called me out of Gaster's room and told me to close them, before leading me to another room.

When my eyes open I see Joey standing in the middle of this room with a big smile. His face and clothes have smudges of black on them, as do his hands. The same black that is on the walls..

I look around, seeing a large bed with black 'blankets' on them and two very fluffy looking 'pillows'. There is a table with drawers next to it, and on this table is a bundle of posters that have not been put on the walls yet and a small 'figurine' of Mr. Void. He was my favorite character from *Agency Heroes*. He used tentacles, very well designed!

Hmm…

"It stinks." I say, scrunching my nose, which causes both Joey and mom to laugh.

"Aye, that's the paint still drying off kiddo. But other than that, do yeh like it?" Joey asks, and I look between him and mom, who has gone to stand next to him. She also has small smudges of this black on her hands.

They both look expectantly at me, and I look around the room again. "Other than the stink, it is a very pleasant room." I acknowledge, and Joey's smile widens as he wraps an arm around mom's shoulders.

"That's good, because it's your room." Mom says, and I blink. I look around again, doubtfully.

"My room?" I question, and mom nods.

"That's right hun. We sorted out the adoption yesterday. As of today, this is officially your home." Mom says quietly. For a few moments, I think about my other home. The door to it always closing after being shocked with poking instruments, while I patiently wait for biomass or being told to move to the bigger home for testing.

This home is much better. Far more pleasant.

Wiggle.

I hop onto the bed, laying out across it as Waffles runs into the room and jumps onto it with me, yipping excitedly. She licks my face, and I allow it. I am feeling too pleasant to correct her right now!

"Well I think yeh were right, going with black." Joey says to mom, amused. "It fits him for some reason."

Mom laughs. I like mom's laugh. She squeezes Joey one more time before walking over to my bed and sitting down, gesturing towards the posters.

"We can hang those up once the paint dries." She explains, and I sit up, nodding excitedly. "Gaster said you liked Mr. Void, so I picked those out for you. We can decorate it more later, when you've figured out everything else you like."

"Thank you." I say quietly. There are warm feelings in my chest. Like happiness, but more. I hear footsteps in the hallway, and turn to see Gaster walking into the room while looking around curiously.

"This is my room Gaster!" I say proudly, and he smiles while looking around.

"I know. Mom told me to keep it a secret, and to keep you out of it until they were done." He laughs, and Joey rolls up his sleeves.

"Well Brooke, should we let the kiddos break in the room?" He asks, and mom nods, standing up. She ruffles my hair before they both walk out.

"Lunch will be ready in about an hour." She says, closing the door behind her.

Gaster comes over to the bed and sits down on it, holding out his fist. Oh, he told me what this is! A fist bump!

I touch his knuckles with my own, and he grins. "Welcome to the family. I guess this makes you my little brother?" He asks, and I tilt

my head.

"Kin? But we do not share relation." I state, and he shakes his head, rolling his eyes.

"You don't have to be related to be family." He says as if it is obvious, and I pause as Waffles crawls into my lap, her tongue hanging out. I scratch her ears, thinking about this.

I had only viewed kin as prey. The Observer was kin, I could feel it in my Core, as was the… Mist Walker, one of the people who had watched my fight called it. We shared relation through what Star-Reader had called Home. But if we did not have to share relation, and we could be family otherwise…

I frown. Did that mean that the Pack had been family?

I touch my chest. Uncomfortable feelings are there again, and Waffles whines as she nuzzles me with her nose.

"You alright JJ?" Gaster asks, and I nod.

"I am undamaged." I respond quietly, grooming Waffles. But Gaster still looks concerned.

"Hey, so I know we've only known each other for like a week and some, but…" He looks hesitant, adjusting his glasses. "But I think you're a pretty okay dude. Weird, yeah, but okay." I frown. Why do people keep calling me weird? I am perfectly normal! "And I want you to know that if there's anything you want to talk about, like serious stuff or normal stuff or whatever, I'll be here to talk. Since you're my little brother and all."

I look at Gaster. He'd stated the last sentence with amusement, but I can tell he is concerned.

The warm feelings are back, and I nod. "Thank you Gaster." I say, and he grins.

"So little bro, you've been getting pretty good at *Agency Heroes.* And now that you have a circlet, we can play other stuff too. Or watch something!" He seems excited, and I smile. I like when Gaster is

excited, he doesn't display cowardice behaviors. "Oh man, you've never even seen movies, or anime. We gotta do that."

I tilt my head curiously. "Movies? Anime?"

Gaster nods emphatically, tapping on his circlet. "Yup! We've got like an hour until lunch is ready, so we could watch something until then. Want to?"

I am hesitant. But if Gaster is excited, I will do so! "Want to!" I confirm, and he laughs, swiping through the air.

"Oh, this one's pretty good. *Until You.* It's about a guy who… you know what, I won't spoil it." He taps the air, and I see a notification in my vision. I tap it, and a screen pops up. "I'm remote sharing, so I'll be the one controlling it. Here, let's-"

He pauses, his hands hovering in the air. "Sorry, one second." He says, lowering his hands. "Hey Sariel. I was just about to watch a movie, what's up?"

I tilt my head curiously, but realize he is using the long distance communication. Joey said it was rude to talk while someone was doing it, so I remain quiet.

"Oh, you guys just got back? Awesome! How did the training go?" He leans back on my bed, crossing his arms over his chest as he looks up at something only he can see. "Uh huh. No… really? It'll be alright, you still have three weeks to improve. Yeah… yeah I guess so. What's that? Later tonight? Uh…" He glances at me, sitting back up. "Yeah, I guess… you can come over. I… no, I'm not acting weird. Yes it's fine, really! But listen, before you come ove-"

He blinks, frowning as he rubs his temples. "Damnit, she always does that." He grumbles. "Hangs up without letting me finish."

"Someone is coming over?" I ask, and Gaster nods hesitantly.

"Yeah, Sariel." He sighs. Oh, she is one of Gaster's friends! "Alright JJ, I guess you'll be meeting her later tonight. Just so you know, she's a little… much."

Hmm.. "What does that mean?" I ask, and he shrugs.

"She's just a lot. And she's brutally honest, so if she says something, don't take it too personally." He warns, and I nod seriously.

"I will not take it personally." I promise, even if I don't know what that means, and Gaster smiles.

"Thanks JJ. Alright, anyways, where was I… oh right! *Until You.*"

-

"JJ." Mom says, and I stiffen, looking up at her hesitantly. Her tone is threatening. Joey, Gaster and I are all eating food mom had made, 'Jambalaya'. She is looking at me with her brows furrowed.

"Yes mom?" I ask, and she taps her fingers on the table. That is not a good sound. She does that when she is displeased.

"What did I say about eating with your hands?" She questions, and I bristle.

"But it is inefficient to use the utensils!" I protest, and Joey laughs. But he quickly stops as Mom glares at him, clearing his throat and continuing to eat.

"Wow this is good! Poured your heart into it love, can really tell." He says, and mom rolls her eyes, but she is smiling slightly. I hesitantly reach for the food aga-

"JJ!" She snaps, and I flinch. Annoyance!

"But I stopped eating with my tentacles like you asked…" I grumble, and she glowers at me.

Deflate.

I sigh and pick up the 'fork', stabbing it into the jambalaya and

bringing it into my mouth. "Don't catch an attitude with me." Mom warns, and Gaster chuckles as he continues to eat.

Reluctantly, I take a bite with the utensil, but…

DELICIOUS!

Mom always makes delicious food.

Wiggle.

Even if it is inefficient, it is still worth it if it means consuming biomass mom prepares.

"Thanks mom." I say, and she smiles as she picks up her own fork.

Waffles whines from underneath the table, and I *growl.* You will be fed biomass later. No begging! She deflates, resting her head on her paws and looking up at me, and I happily resume ***devouring***.

When all of the biomass has been consumed, Gaster picks up the plates and sets them in the 'dishwasher'. I am disappointed there isn't more biomass, but… it was still delicious. I will have to be okay with four 'servings'.

There is a knock at the front door and mom starts to stand, but Joey waves his hand. "I'll get it love, yeh can relax." He says, and mom smiles at him as he stands and walks away.

"Hey mom, Sariel wants to come over a little later if that's okay." Gaster says, and mom nods, tapping her circlet.

"That's fine! Will she be staying for dinner?" She asks, and Gaster shrugs.

My ears flick as I hear quiet talking coming from outside of the house, from Joey and another person.

"I don't know." Gaster replies. "I was actually thinking of going out with her and JJ. He's never been to Giorno's, and you know how much she loves that place."

Mom laughs and nods her head. "Alright, in that case I'll give you both some money to spend. If you're going out anyways, would you mind taking Joey shopping for some clo-"

I turn, unfocusing from the conversation as I hear footsteps enter the home. One pair I recognize as Joey's, but the other's is unfamiliar. "If yeh wouldn't mind just waiting in the living room." Joey says quietly, and another voice says they will.

Joey walks into the dining room a few moments later, his expression uncomfortable. He looks at mom for a few moments, and she seems to have noticed his expression.

"Who is it?" Mom asks curiously, and Joey clears his throat.

"It's uh… some bloke from the Academy. Says he's here to talk to JJ and… us." He says quietly, and mom frowns.

"What? Why would they be here for JJ? I told him not to…" She trails off, then turns to look at me, her eyes narrowing accusingly. "I thought I told you not to take the Trials."

I pause, my eyes lowering. "You told me to say no." I mumble, looking up hesitantly as mom raises an eyebrow. "And I did say no! I kept the promise! But then…" Hesitant, as mom glares at me. "But then I said yes."

Mom pinches the bridge of her nose, scrunching her eyes shut. "JJ…" She lets out a sigh of exasperation. "We are going to talk about this later. For now, let's go see what he wants." She lowers her hand and stands up, and I do too. Joey turns around and we all follow him out of the dining room and into the living room.

There is a human man in a black suit standing in there, a bright smile on his face as he sees us. "Hello there." He greets, extending a hand that Joey takes with his own and shakes. Oh! That is what you are supposed to do when the hand is extended. "My name is Leo Pensenata. Do you mind if I…" He gestures to a couch.

Joey nods his affirmation, and we sit down on a couch opposite of him. Mom looks displeased, and Joey just looks uncomfortable.

Waffles wanders into the living room, growling as she sees the man, Leo.

Interesting. I push out with my mind…

Hmm…

He is not a predator, but I sense a Core from him. I lick my lips.

Leo glances at Waffles, who bristles and stands protectively in front of me. Wonderful threat display yet again, Waffles!

Leo looks around the house, his smile widening as his gaze settles back onto mom and Joey. "This is a beautiful home you have here." He compliments, and Mom crosses her arms over her chest.

"Thank you. Now can I ask what you're here for?"

Leo nods, leaning forward as he looks at me, then back at mom. "Yes. I'm sorry, I meant to come earlier but there wasn't a home address assigned to Mr. Waffle's circlet ID until this morning. You two are his parents, I presume?"

Mom and Joey both nod slowly, and Leo continues. "Well, in that case I am happy to inform you both that Mr. Waffles has been accepted as an Academy Selectee."

He looks at us expectantly, but mom only continues to stare at him while Joey clears his throat. I tilt my head curiously.

"Selectee?" I ask, and Leo nods.

"That's right. Although your performance in the other Trials were… less than what is typically expected, your performance during the Combat Trial was exemplary. I reviewed the footage myself, and I must say, you are a very capable combatant Mr. Waffles."

Oh, so he recognizes my superior form's combat ability!

Wiggle.

"It is my absolute pleasure to extend a formal invitation to the

Academy, on behalf of the Bounty Agency." He says, once again looking expectantly at mom and Joey.

"I'm afraid we'll have to refuse." Mom says, and both me and Leo turn to look at her.

"But mom!" I protest, and mom turns a glare on me.

"Don't 'but mom' me. You know full well what I meant when I said to say 'no', JJ." She snaps, and I huddle closer to Joey. He looks both amused and concerned, and Leo hurriedly raises a hand.

"If you're worried about expenses, I assure you that he will be offered a full scholarship, tuition and boarding. Any other costs, such as food and other arrangements, Novastorm has personally offered to sponsor." He says, and at this mom pauses.

"Wait, Lycia? What does she have to do with this?" Mom asks, and Leo's eyes widen slightly.

"Ah, we prefer not to use Agency member's names when…" He trails off, his eyes narrowing just the slightest amount. "Wait, Brooke Gruschwald… The Adjudicator?" He asks, and mom nods slowly.

"That's right. Now, what does Lycia have to do with this?" She repeats her question, and Leo shifts uncomfortably. Interesting! Upon learning mom's identity, he has begun to exhibit intimidated behaviors.

"Ah, apologies for not recognizing you sooner ma'am. You see, Novastorm was one of the judges for the Combat Trial. She has decided that should Mr. Waffles here accept the Academy's invitation, she will take him under her wing as a protege." He explains, and mom thinks this over, chewing her lip.

"Brooke…" Joey begins, sighing slightly. "Excuse me, Mr. Pensenata, would you allow us a few moments to discuss?" He asks, and Leo nods.

"Of course." He replies, standing up. "In the meantime, would you happen to have a bathroom I could use?"

Joey points further down the hall. "It'll be the first door on the left." He answers, and Leo nods gratefully as he follows Joey's instructions.

I look at mom pleadingly. "Mom, I was told I would get to fight if I join the Academy." I say, and she looks at me.

"Listen to me." She says quietly, cupping her hands to my cheek. "You have just gotten out of a terrible situation, and I don't want you to immediately place yourself in one again. We can-"

"Brooke. Love." Joey interrupts, and Mom glares at him. I look at Joey too, and on his expression I see he is troubled… but there's also something else there. "I've… there are things that I haven't told you about JJ. Things I've seen." He takes a deep breath. "I care about the kiddo, I wouldn't have brought him here if I didn't. But he needs a space where he can learn more about his abilities. A space where he can meet more people like him."

Yes! Thank you Joey! Convince mom!

Mom looks like she's about to protest, and Joey holds up a hand. "I know. But he's not quite… adjusted, yet. Maybe, if he's around people with abilities like him, he can see how they behave. He can make friends there. Besides, it's not like he has to join the BA or RCO once he graduates. You took a full gap year between graduating from the Academy and joining RCO. We met during that gap year, remember? We can have him back after, and see if he still wants to go down that path later."

Mom purses her lips, but nods reluctantly. "I know, but…" She sighs, then takes a deep breath. "Okay. JJ, look at me."
I do so, and she cups my face with her hands. "Is this absolutely what you want to do? It'll be dangerous. You could get hurt, and you'll be fighting a *lot*."

I nod hurriedly, licking my lips. Fighting meant I would get to *devour*. I wished to attain more structures, and mom said only people who joined RCO or the BA were officially allowed to hunt Rift Entities.

Mom sighs again, before turning away and tapping on her circlet.

"Lycia? It's me. Yes, Brooke. I was told you were going to be sponsoring a new Selectee. Yes, Joey Waffles. Why do I care? Because he's my *son*. Yes, really. And if anything happens to him, I will personally throw you into a Rift." Mom growls, and both myself and Joey swallow at her tone.

Mom is once again a ***predator.*** But a **predator** for my sake. Warm feelings in my chest again.

Wiggle.

Mom lets out a large sigh, rubbing her temples again as Leo enters the living room. He sits down on the couch, smiling.

"So, have you all come to a decision?" He asks, and mom nods.

"JJ will accept the invitation to the Academy."

Leo's smile widens, and he taps on his circlet. "Excellent. There are still three weeks until the start of the semester. I will make arrangements for training exercises with some other Selectees, and will send you any relevant information."

Leo then stands, extending a hand towards mom, then Joey, and finally to me. I shake it, and he nods.

"Although it's a little preemptive… welcome to the Academy, Mr. Waffles."

Chapter 35: A Monster By Any Other Name

A note from Sonkoso

Heya everyone! I'm back with another thing I learned while doing research!

The concept of a police force existing in most civilizations has been around for quite a while. In the early days of human history, it is believed that the act of policing was handled by the community as a whole, each individual member responsible for the safety of their community. But what is widely regarded as one of the first police forces is Egypt's *sab heri seker,* a chief of police that assisted the official that was appointed by the Pharaoh ,in charge of Justice and Security. Although back then, policing duties mostly concerned tax collecting, as most disputes were handled privately by the citizens.

This concept of citizens mostly handling their own disputes persisted even up to the Roman Empire's Republic days, although ancient Greece's *astynomoi, agoranomoi, metronomoi,* and the "Eleven" loosely resembled a policing body, and handled most of criminal justice. In the Roman Empire, an official "fire fighting" force was given more legitimacy than a policing force.

Link to the article: https://www.britannica.com/topic/police/The-history-of-policing-in-the-West

Anyways, hope you enjoy!

"*There have been concerning reports of a certain faction rising within the border settlements, Chief. A group that has taken to calling themselves the Hands of the Makers." A voice says, followed by a round of approving murmurs.*

Another voice takes its time to answer, but when it does it is bassy and deeply grave in the way only an older man's could be. "We are aware of this group. Our conjoined intel operations with the Rift Containment Office is monitoring the situation even now."

A chorus of voices rises up, but one stands out from the rest.

"Surely the possible threat they present to the United Cities constitutes a more proactive action than simply monitoring the situation!" It protests, and the chorus of voices rises in agreement. "Residents of the United Cities have reported seeing members wearing their symbol as close as Hurghada!"

It isn't until the voices quiet down that the Chief responds. "We have already detained certain members of this organization for questioning. I assure you, the situation is well in hand. Now, I'll take the next question."

-Panel Interview with the United Cities Chief of Police, Matthew Ferrera, 11,006 PR

Fiona loosened her tie as she settled down onto a small couch in the private meeting room, one of many in the Sacison Rift Containment Office. Beside her, Bill had his arms folded over his chest, his bulky form straining against the seams of his suit.

Across from her, sitting on another couch, was a nuan male with dark grey hair and pale silver eyes. His stubble indicated a day or two without shaving, but the bags under his eyes suggested more than a few days with lack of good rest. His leather jacket barely concealed the power armor he was wearing, something that drew her attention.

"You always have that on?" Fiona asked, crossing one leg over the other and folding her hands on her knee. The detective nodded, sipping coffee from a paper cup. It was the least they could give him, haggard as he looked.

Caliban looked down at his power armor, chuckling wryly. "It's how I sleep at night, knowing I have this on me." He admits, and Bill nods sympathetically from the side. Fiona herself taps her circlet, skimming over information she had already memorized in the past day.

"You have a very decorated past, Detective Caliban." She remarked,

her eyes flicking between his face and the picture on his file. "Class four. Retired with high distinction from the Rift Containment Office, hired and promoted nearly immediately to the rank of Sergeant in the Niminir PD. Recommended for the position of detective after just two years. Married, divorced, then remarried and…" She trailed off, not quite having the heart to finish her statement, but the detective seemed to notice her hesitation.

"It's alright, it was a few years ago now." He said quietly, though there was an edge to his tone that suggested otherwise. "I see you did your research on me. Guess I shouldn't have expected less, I used to be in your same position."

Fiona nodded, though she didn't look pleased at the comparison. "It *also* says that you were dismissed from your position just a few years ago, due to excessive use of force on mutated individuals. One case of which would have permanently paralyzed one of your victims, if they hadn't been rushed to a hospital en route. Relocated to Burstin, to pick up the slack as a competent detective there. Conveniently in a population with few cases of mutation. I suppose those timelines just happen to be a coincidence?"

Detective Caliban's eyes narrowed slightly, his jaw clenching, but he took a deep breath. "Listen, Mrs…"

"Ms." She corrected. "Ms. Liraveil."

"Right. Ms. Liraveil. That was a very different point in my life, a dark one which I don't wish to relive." He said, lightly rubbing the ring on his finger. Fiona noted that he still wore it, even four years after his wife's death. "Now, to why I'm here. What we discussed over call-"

"What we discussed," Fiona interrupted, "is classified on orders far above my position. The only reason I agreed to meet with you at all was as a courtesy to a former Rift Containment Officer. Nothing more."

Caliban nodded again, though not without a suffering sigh. "So may I at least have the FOUO version, then?" He asked. Fiona glanced towards Bill, who shrugged.

"Least we can do. Guy drove a full day to get here, and without any rest seems like." He said, and Fiona sighed.

"Yes, I believe that can be done." She said, then narrowed her eyes. "But this *could* have been done over a secure connection at distance. You didn't have to come all the way here to get this information."

Caliban leaned back on the sofa, putting his hands in his jacket pockets. She noticed the way his gaze slid between both her and Bill. Though it appeared to be only passing observation, Fiona knew he was analyzing everything about them both, picking apart their body language and looking for the slightest hints of anything he could pry into.

Like all RCOs, she knew that habit never left, even after retirement.

"Like you said, Burstin PD is what I was assigned to." He said. "Now, Burstin's a small town. People that live there are small town too. Do you know how many cases of murder I get there?"

"No. How many?" She humored him, and he held up two fingers.

"Two. In the three years I've been there, there have been two murders. One was a domestic violence case, and another was a fresh muti- mutant." He hurriedly corrected the slur to its proper term as both Fiona's and Bill's expressions hardened. "When I was stationed in Niminir, we'd see two cases an *hour*. Theft? Assault? Those numbers are higher, but still very manageable when compared to Niminir. Now, how many missing person's cases do you think I get?"

When neither of the two Officers replied, Caliban closed his fingers. "Zero. Genuine missing persons cases, at least. In the past three years, there have been zero genuine cases of missing persons. Couple of runaways, sure. Kids that didn't come home when they were supposed to. They were all found within twenty four hours."

"The point, Detective. I believe this has to eventually lead to a point." Fiona snapped. He had clearly won no favors with the almost slur he'd said.

"My *point*," He stressed, "is that in three years, there have been zero

people reported missing in Burstin, and have *stayed* missing, for longer than forty eight hours. And then, just a few days after a quarantine was placed on a route that leads through it to Mackadon, *five* people were reported to be missing. That was a week and a half ago now."

At this, both Fiona and Bill didn't let any emotion pass their expressions. They knew Caliban would pick up on it, because they would have.

He studied their faces, his gaze unwavering, before clicking his tongue. "I believe that whatever that quarantine was for made its way to Burstin, and… *disappeared* five of its residents. And I believe that whatever it was made its way to Sacison."

"Well then detective, I believe you'll be happy to have believed wrong. And more than happy to know that containment was successful." Fiona said, and Caliban scoffed.

"Don't give me that shit." He snarled, leaning forward. Bill uncrossed his arms, ready to step in, and Fiona waved a hand. Caliban didn't so much as look at him. "There were signs of Rift Entity exposure in the town."

Finally their carefully crafted masks of apathy cracked, just the slightest amount. It was only a glance between the two of them, but Caliban noticed it. And Fiona cursed inwardly when she realized that he did.

"You're certain?" She asked, and Caliban nodded.

"More than certain. My Core Ability allows me to see certain events in the past. And what I saw was definitely of the Rift variety." He said, once more leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. "Now, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to know what the *fuck* took or killed people in my town. One former Rift Officer to another."

Fiona chewed her bottom lip, and Bill finally sighed, walking over to take a seat next to her. His frame took up most of the couch, but Fiona was small enough that it didn't matter. "What I'm about to say doesn't leave this room, understand?" He demanded in his deep,

gravelling voice, and Caliban nodded.

Bill let out a deep breath, before tapping on his circlet. Fiona recognized it as him turning off its recording function, and she did the same. "Almost a month ago, a group of Academy Selectees went to a forest along the Mackadon route for a hunting exercise. They were told that they were allowed to keep the Cores they earned. Kids, each of them, the oldest no more then sixteen. It was a low class forest, nothing they shouldn't have been able to handle."

"What they didn't know," Bill continued, "was that there was an Androtech lab in the forest. One that had had a containment breach. A class seven entity that had walked straight out of a Rift made by one of Androtech's experiments."

Caliban stiffened, his face going pale with horror. "Class *seven?*" He breathed, and Bill nodded. "Were there any survivors?"

Bill nodded. "There were, but they had been… momentarily compromised. It was a category six, with notable cat two abilities. Now, the class seven Rift Entity hasn't been located, but the Rift is still active there. Containment is still underway as we speak, though the route has been cleared of its quarantine. The forest, however, has been raised to a class four on average, with five's having been observed in the area. But this was only after all but one of the Selectees had died. I can't tell you any more than that, because *we* don't know any more than that. And what we do know is top secret."

Caliban seemed to hesitate, before he tapped his own circlet. An image sprang into the air, of a kid with obvious signs of mutation and a large man laughing as he stomped on a can. "You wouldn't happen to recognize either of these figures, would you? Any reports that put them near the quarantine?" He asked.

The duo studied the image for a few moments. They looked between each other before Fiona shook her head. "No, I'm afraid we don't." She replied. "Now, is that all of the information you needed?"

Caliban tapped his circlet, taking their answer at face value as the image disappeared from the air. But there was a gleam in his eyes. One that made both Fiona and Bill uncomfortable. He nodded,

standing up, and they did so as well.

"Yes, that information has helped me a lot. Thank you very much." He said, nodding to them both, and they returned the nod. When he walked out, Fiona scratched her head.

"You saw his eyes too, right?" She asked Bill, who nodded.

"Yeah. Something in him changed." He remarked, pursing his lips. "But now that he has his information, he's no longer our problem."

Fiona nodded her head absently, then scowled. "As long as he doesn't cause any problems in Sacison. Fucking genists, I can't stand them. You heard how he almost called them muties."

-

Caliban had found the fire causing his smoke alright. He'd run a search through the Sacison PD's database of any Joeys who had a trucker's license, and had narrowed it down to three. And of those, only one had an ID that resembled the person in the picture Oscar had shown him.

Turned out he was married, and had two sons. Gaster Gruschwald and Joey Waffles. The former had a birth certificate to his file and a clear record. The latter had been finalized for adoption into the family just last night, during his drive to Sacison. It was late afternoon, and he was in his cruiser, already heading to the address in his file.

His conversation hadn't been as helpful as he would have liked, but he at least had confirmation that there *was* a containment failure in the quarantine. The entity that was meant to be contained was a class seven, and one that had category two abilities. It might have explained Oscar's reluctance to tell him the truth, if psionic manipulation was a part of the equation.

And whoever the kid was, even if he wasn't necessarily part of the

quarantine, the detective was certain that he was connected to it somehow.

Besides, he was a mutie. One with an odd name, sure, but a monster by any other name was still a monster. And he knew the old adage about birds and their feathers.

Caliban idly looked around, taking in the crowd of people walking along the sidewalks as he came to a stop, along with every other car in the late afternoon traffic. He found himself reminiscing about his time in Niminir while idly brushing his thumb along his ring. He'd grown up and lived most of his life in the city, but circumstances had pushed him into his small town position.

Not that he minded, of course. The people there were pleasant enough, and-

He froze, not quite believing what his eyes were seeing as he looked at a trio of teenagers walking along with the crowd. He ignored the blaring horns from the cars behind him as he focused on their group.

In the middle was a tall, chubby kid with caramel colored skin and glasses. He was talking to a young blonde girl, though the way she carried herself immediately alerted Caliban that she had extensive combat training. And trailing just a bit behind them was a smaller teen who was looking around at everything with fascination, every bit the picture of a border settlement bumpkin, with wolf ears and a tail.

The detective hurriedly drove forward, making a turn onto the street they were walking beside and following the traffic. Because despite the nearly impossible odds of spotting them, he recognized the kid from Oscar's photo and his identification picture.

Joey Waffles.

Chapter 36: Something Less Than Human

Sariel brushed aside her bangs, flipped her hair over her shoulder, and tugged one of the strings on her hoodie down. Just off enough from being even that it would catch Gaster's attention, because she knew how much he hated it. Taking one last look at herself, she was about to knock on the door before she took a whiff of her hoodie. She'd showered, but had to do one last double check to make sure that there wasn't any lingering B.O.

Satisfied, she knocked on the door and waited patiently. Almost passively her mind reached outwards, and she smiled to herself when she caught Gaster's own private little universe of thoughts and emotions. She reflexively started to read into them, but forced herself to stop. She'd learned enough etiquette, and had enough of the basic manners of Cored interaction with civilians drilled into her by her primer classes, to know that to do such would be a violation of trust and security.

Also in the house were the two nebulous clouds of Mr. and Mrs. Grushchwalds' thoughts. But she paused as she sensed two more minds, ones she didn't recognize. One of the clouds of thought was small, primal almost. But she recognized the faint undertones of a canine's urges to it, so they must have gotten a dog since she saw them last. The other mind, however, was different.

It was human… in the most basic sense. But there was something off about it. A tint of something that felt oddly familiar and alien at the same time. And more than that, the cloud immediately retracted away from her mind, sealing itself closed in the way only a class 2 would be able to.

Just as she was about to prod further, however, the door opened to reveal Mrs. Gruschwald's smiling face. Sariel immediately felt her brows unfurrow and her features relax. There was something about Gaster's mom's smile that was warm and inviting, an almost supernaturally smoothing force.

It was something all moms had, she guessed.

"Hey sweetheart, it's good to see you!" Mrs. Gruschwald exclaimed, standing aside to let her in. Sariel stepped into the house, a lit candle bathing the home with cinnamony warmth. "You just got back from your training week earlier today, right?"

Sariel nodded as the door closed behind her, taking a deep breath. She loved the smell of Gaster's house. It was different from the scent of gunpowder and cleaning oil that her own home was always steeped in. "Yes ma'am. Ugh, don't even get me started on it, it was a disaster."

Mrs. Gruschwald laughed, nodding sympathetically as she walked further down the hall. "I remember those days. Is Instructor Agil still in charge of the Camp?" She asked, and Sariel pursed her lips, causing her to laugh again. "By the looks of it he is. No one was *ever* good enough for his standards, don't let it get to you. Would you like anything to drink? You know we always have a little bit of everything."

Sariel shook her head slowly, a faint hum in her ears as the unfamiliar mind carefully reached out to mingle with her own. It wasn't attempting to form a link, not quite yet at least. For some reason she was reminded of a child's curious fingers poking and prodding at anything that caught their interest.

"Is there someone else here?" She asked, and Mrs. Gruschwald paused for a few moments before nodding.

"I suppose I should have known that you'd realize. Just a moment." She hummed, before leaning her head into the stairwell. "Boys! Sariel's here, come down and say hi!"

Sariel's heart fluttered just the tiniest bit when she heard Gaster's deep voice drift down the stairs, as well as Mr. Gruschwald's confirming grunt. She then mentally slapped herself as she caught her hands subconsciously fixing her hair.

She didn't even know when it had started to happen, but she was *not* going to make it obvious. She nearly cursed as she saw Mrs. Gruschwald's smile and side glance, her face flushing just the tiniest amount as she smiled sheepishly.

Maybe she was a bit more obvious than she thought she was.

Footsteps trampled down the stairway, two heavier pairs followed by a much lighter third pair. Mr. Gruschwald smiled down at Sariel as he came into view from the stairwell, having to lean down to avoid hitting his head on the low-rise ceiling.

"Hey there kiddo. Looks like yeh got a good tan in, working your arse off at camp." He greeted, and Sariel smiled proudly. She'd hoped people would notice.

Gaster followed behind shortly afterward, talking over his shoulder to a third person she didn't recognize. He turned from the stranger to look at her, and her stomach did miniature gymnastics as his chocolate brown eyes took her in. "Hey Sary." He said, his voice rumbling in the air, and she forced her usual grin onto her face.

Don't make it awkward. "Hey Gaster!" She called back, as the trio stepped into the hallway to join them. Mr. Gruschwald looked between everyone gathered before walking over to Mrs. Gruschwald and kissing the top of her head.

"Alright kiddos, just be back before it gets too dark out. Yeh know the rules, no candy from strangers and all that." He said, and they all nod while Gaster rolls his eyes. Sariel forces herself to stop staring at him, to instead look at the boy who had been following behind them quietly.

He was normal looking enough, despite the obvious signs of mutation. A small, pale face with dark brown eyes that studied her curiously, grey wolf ears and a bushy grey tail that was wagging behind him slightly. Gaster noticed Sariel staring at him, and he cleared his throat.

"Ah, right. Sariel, since you hung up on me *again* before I could explain anything, this is my new little brother. He was officially adopted as of yesterday, but he's been here for a couple of weeks. Sariel meet Joey, Joey meet Sariel. We call him JJ, since Joey's my dad's name and all." He said, and Sariel smiled slightly. She was a bit disappointed that she and Gaster probably wouldn't be spending time alone, but she guessed that-

"You wish to mate with Gaster?" Joey asked abruptly, and Sariel's thoughts ground to a halt. Her smile remained frozen on her face, her body going completely stiff. Gaster glanced between her and Joey, chuckling.

"Right, I told him we were mates. We're friends, yeah." He said, and Sariel nearly crumpled with relief. She glared at Joey, before smiling sweetly at Gaster.

"Yep, as Gasty and his dad says, we're mates." She agreed perhaps just a bit too hurriedly, but Joey only slowly shook his head, sniffing the air.

"But the pheromones you're releasing suggest that you wish to procreate with-"

"WOW WOULD YOU LOOK AT THE TIME!" Sariel practically screamed, her face going bright red as she heard laughter coming from deeper in the house. Both Gaster and Joey blinked in surprise, and she tapped her circlet. "I mean, if we want to head over to Giorno's, we have to beat the dinner rush!"

Gaster nodded slowly, that stupid dumb look on his face that she liked - that she certainly *didn't* like. "Right, yeah. I guess so. We were actually gonna go clothes shopping for JJ before that, if that's okay. He also needs to get measured for his uniform since he- Oh right! Sariel, JJ's been accepted into the Academy, so you'll be going together. Isn't that great?"

Sariel forced her smile to widen, though she felt her eye slightly twitching. "Yeah, that's… *awesome.*" She said, and as Joey looked like he was about to speak again she snapped a mental link between their minds. *If you're going to try and fucking out me again, don't. I mean it, or I'll roast your mind until you piss your pants.*

She glared at JJ once Gaster had started tapping on his circlet. "Right, looks like the closest tailoring shop is over at…" Sariel wanted to keep listening to Gaster, but she nearly staggered when she felt a sudden surge of primal violence flood over their link as JJ's ears flattened and his eyes narrowed.

*You are not a **predator.** Do not threaten me.* She heard a voice that was entirely different from the one he had spoken with.

Yup, that settled it.

She definitely did *not* like JJ. And judging by the look he was giving her, the feeling was mutual.

You wanna go, you little punk?

I do not want to go anywhere with you, but if you wish to fight-

"Hey guys, everything okay?" Gaster asked, looking hesitantly between the two of them, completely oblivious to the mental battle taking place over their link. Sariel clenched her jaw, while JJ's ears flicked and his brows furrowed. But the one to break the stalemate between them was Sariel, who nodded and forced her smile back.

"Yeah, everything's fine. JJ here is a pretty funny little guy." She lied, and JJ snorted. She felt her eye twitch, but continued smiling. "So, walk and talk? I feel like I *need* to know how this little twe- I mean, how you guys ended up taking him in."

Gaster's smile grew big and bright in the way only his could, and he nodded as he walked to the front door and pulled it open. "It's a funny story actually." He said, waiting for all three of them to file out before closing the door behind them. They were in a nicer portion of the city, a gated community that was about a twenty minute walk from a good shopping center.

"Joey hit me with his truck." JJ answered as Gaster was about to resume talking, and Sariel's eyes widened while Gaster winced.

"Mr. Gruschwald did *what!?*" She exclaimed, and Gaster sighed loudly.

"Okay, well, I didn't want to *start* there, but yeah. So, story goes that dad was making a supply run to Mackadon…" He began as the trio walked down the sidewalk.

-

I do not like Gaster's mate.

She is very annoying. She doesn't display cowardice behaviors, and in fact she is very combative… but somehow that is even worse! She even threatened me despite not being a predator.

All because I stated the very clear signs that she wished to procreate with Gaster. Her pheromones had flooded the entire house. Because of this, she also does not seem to like me.

But Gaster very clearly likes her, as do mom and Joey. So I cannot eat her.

Frustrated!

We are back in the loud area of the 'city', with lots of people around. There are more big buildings, and people walk in and out of them as cars drive by along the street beside us. We have just finished 'clothes shopping' for my main body, as apparently I will need more of these clothes if I wish to attend the Academy. I do not understand why I cannot wear the clothes I have already been wearing, but mom said that it was necessary.

Sigh. The process was very annoying. Sariel kept making fun of the clothes I wished to wear, and to make it worse Gaster even laughed along with her making fun of them. Though he apologized when he realized his betrayal.

I take a deep breath, allowing the scents of the city to enter the modified olfactory system I have modified. There are so many tantalizing scents, rich sources of biomass offered by people… who are also biomass.

But through everything else, lies the annoying Sariel's pheromones. She very clearly wishes to procreate with Gaster, though I do not smell any of those same pheromones coming from him. Smug.

At least he knows which mates to avoid. He will never breed with

you, Sariel!

"Oh, I got JJ hooked on *Agency Heroes*." Gaster says, and I immediately resume listening to their conversation. Sariel does not seem to like it when he mentions me in their conversation, but she smiles anyway. It seems that she also knows to show interest in what Gaster likes to talk about.

"Is that right?" She hums, turning back to smirk at me. "You any good? I doubt it."

I bristle. Does she doubt my flawless skill in the game?

"I am better than you." I growl. I know in my Core that I must be better than Sariel. But her smirk only widens as Gaster shrugs.

"He's definitely better than I was when I first started playing, but… you might still have him beat." He admits. Gaster has betrayed me again! How could he possibly think that I would lose to *Sariel*.

She laughs, looking back at me and sticking her tongue out. "Told you short stack, I'm better." She taunts, and I feel the frustration building inside of me.

I think I may hate Sariel.

"Come on guys, give it a rest." Gaster sighs wearily, as he has heard us fighting the entire trip. "We're almost at Giorno's anyways."

Oh, they said that Giorno's was a 'restaurant'. Which means…

FOOD! I am so *hungry*. I have not eaten anything since 'lunch'!

I lick my lips, looking around as we continue walking. Gaster seems to have noticed my excitement, as he turns back to look at me with a smile.

"You're gonna love it. All of their food is greasy and high in calories, just like you like it." He assures me, and I nod hurriedly. I sniff the air, hoping to find this 'Giorno's', and…

I pause.

The loudness of the crowd is deafening, the scent of each pulsing heart and coursing blood calling to me tantalizingly. But just underneath it, is something I have not smelled in weeks. Though it is slightly different from what I remember, I can smell…

Kin.

But the Kin scent is very wrong. It is weak, and sick, and it mingles with the smell of a human in a strange way. I raise my nose in the air, pushing out my mind, which makes Sariel stop and turn to look at me.

"The hell are you doing?" She hisses, but I ignore her, probing with my mind. Past the annoying Sariel and Gaster, past everyone else present. Until finally, I feel Kin's mind. But it is wrong. It feels like a human mind, but very different. One that is dark and strange and filled with pain, and hunger, and as it senses my own mind mingle with it it is overcome by-

RAGE

I flinch and pull back my mind in on myself, growling as I bring out my tentacles. Gaster's eyes widen and Sariel reaches into her hoodie, but I do not care. I look around frantically, trying to find the Kin. It is going to attack soon!

"JJ, put your tentacles away-" Sariel begins to say before a loud scream interrupts her. She immediately starts looking to where it came from as everyone around us on the sidewalk stops and does the same. I feel her mind brush past mine, and when her eyes widen I know she has sensed it too.

There is more screaming, and over the crowd I see large black tentacles waving in the air. It thrashes against the ground around it, as humans and nuans start running away. And when they clear out, I can see the Kin.

It looks like a human female, but… it is not. It is less than human, and more like Kin. Their clothes are old and torn, their skin dark black like Kin in some places but pale in others. Their eyes are bright yellow, and as the scent of blood fills the air, making my mouth

water, it looks straight at me through the people in the crowd running away.

"Kill…" The Kin whispers, so quiet that through all of the screams even the wolf auditory nervous system has trouble hearing it. "Kill kill kill kill KILL **KILL *KILLL!***"

And with a loud scream that rips through my eardrums, it starts running towards us.

Chapter 37: With Blood and Bone

"Doctor Majila, there seems to be a growing phenomenon of teenagers exposing themselves to physical harm." A nuan woman with bright silver hair, sitting on a lavishly cushioned chair, says to another nuan just across from her. "It's rumored that they're attempting to artificially trigger a mutation."

The nuan across from her nods gravely, his expression grim. His dark blue hair is just slightly too slicked back, small dried globs of gel visible, though the woman makes a point not to look at it.

"Indeed." He replies, his tone matching his expression in severity. "I have heard these troubling rumors as well."

The woman adjusts slightly in her seat, leaning forward. "Is there any credibility to these attempts? I mean, is it really possible for them to mutate through these means?"

Doctor Majila shakes his head slowly, his expression souring. "Dangerous questions to ask, but ones that unfortunately seem necessary. Though the subject should be taught in schools, all it takes is one influencer popular among the youth to tell them something different and young, impressionable minds soak it up. After all, many in today's culture wish for powers when seemingly so many of their peers have them."

"So it isn't possible?" The woman tries to clarify through Majila's rant, which causes the doctor to pause.

"Well… it is ***possible****, though the chances are very slim. What these young people are trying to induce is what is called a trigger event. As we all know, mutation most often occurs when there is a strong stressor in a mutant's environment. Intense fear, anxiety, and of course pain, can cause mutation. However, a trigger event is only one part of mutation."*

The woman nods. "The other part being exposure to hera radiation, correct?"

This time it's Majila's turn to nod. "Right. Simultaneous exposure to hera

radiation and a trigger event is what causes mutation. However, the amount of radiation one would need to be exposed to is frankly astounding. Only direct Rift exposure, or an encounter with a Class Four Rift entity or above, should be able to trigger it. And upon beginning the process of mutation, if there isn't sufficient enough nutrition and resources to guide its process, the results could be catastrophic."

The woman shifts, a tone deaf smile on her face. One the doctor doesn't share. "So, no point in throwing ourselves in front of let's say… a truck, to try to get super powers?" She asks, dark humor in her tone, though the nod the doctor gives contains none.

"Correct." He states, turning to the camera. "Please, if you're watching this, do not attempt to intentionally cause a trigger event. The only thing you'll get out of it is injury."

*-Live interview with Doctor Majila Grasicho on "*The Evening Minds"

"***KIIIILLLL!"*** The Kin screams as it runs towards us. The scent of blood is strong in the air, the Kin's six thick tentacles soaked with it as they flail in the air. It moves strangely, more lurching strides than an efficient run. It is like its tentacles are too heavy for its main body to control, as it drags them behind it. There are wounded people crawling away on the ground, and the **fear** scent blankets the area. It is slow, its tentacles as thick as its legs.

"Gaster, get back!" Sariel shouts as she pulls out a small stick from her 'hoodie'. I look at Gaster, and frown.

He is displaying extreme cowardice behaviors. His eyes are wide, and the **fear** scent he gives off is thick. He is like prey that is too afraid to move when faced with a predator. This is not good.

People scream as they run around us, cars blaring loudly as they dash into the streets. Blood is splattered along the sidewalks and on the sides of buildings. I lower into a crouch, growling as I form a link

with Sariel.

Gaster is feeling the prey fear. I think to her, and she turns to look at me before glancing back at Gaster. She nods, raising the black stick in her hand, and I flinch as it snaps and crackles with energy.

It is a poking instrument! I thought only the humans in home had them.

Let's lead it away from him then. I can feel its mind, it only wants to kill you for some reason.

I snarl.

All kin wish to kill me, though I do not know why!

Digging my claws into the ground, I run to the side as Sariel rushes to the other side. Eyes open along the kin's tentacles as it watches us both, similar to how my own eye tentacles function. They raise, and I launch myself onto the side of a building, stabbing my tentacles through the wall to grasp onto it. I climb high, my armored tentacles cracking the wall as they stab through it. Perhaps the Osteokinesis will be of good use here, I do not wish to get close to the tentacles.

One of the tentacles points at me, and I sense a core acti-

Two cor-

THREE CORES!?

THAT IS CHEATING! COWARDICE! HOW CAN KIN HAVE THREE COR-

I feel the **instinct** to ***move,*** and I rip my body forward along the side of the building as a large spike of blood pierces the spot I was just in. There is a loud **boom**, and the wall of the building I'm holding onto explodes into pieces. I launch myself away, my tentacles stabbing into the ground and pulling me away before the large chunks of wall can crush me. There are more screams, as people inside of the building crawl further in, though a few people fall and land on the ground with a wet *squelch*, their screaming going silent instantly.

I flatten my ears and growl as I study the Kin. It is able to shoot blood biomass out and...

Another core activation! I watch carefully, waiting for the blood spike to-

PAIN! I dodge to the side as my eye tentacles survey the area. What caused the pain?

…

THE PARTS OF BUILDING ARE MOVING!?

The larger pieces of the building crack and crumble into smaller chunks, floating into the air. Two of the Kin's tentacles slam onto the ground, and the pieces of wall fling towards me. I hurriedly dodge as it dozens of these pieces slam into the ground with smaller but still loud **booms** of sound, cracking the concrete with every impact.

"L-l-london bridge…" The kin says in what is between a scream and a whisper, and Sariel attempts to rush towards it. Her poking instrument crackles with electricity, and one of the tentacles points toward her, launching another blood spike. Sariel rolls to the side, popping up to her feet as more blood spikes come. She raises a hand, clawing to the side and the spikes crash into the ground all around her. HURRY MUST RUSH THE KIN WHILE IT IS DISTRA-

PAAAAIN! I grunt, looking down hurriedly. A part of the ground has spiked upward just in front of me while I was running, piercing me through the stomach. I must move! Before another spike co-

PAAAAIN PAIN PAIN! I snarl and surround myself with my armored tentacles as pieces of the ground crack, floating upwards and forming more spikes, attempting to stab me. They sever portions of the tentacles, but do not pierce the main body. Develop armor! Refine armor! Refine armor further!

Another ground spike crashes into my chest from underneath me, piercing through my tentacles, but my armor does not break. But it cracks and the attack sends me up into the air.

IDEA!

I form a link with the Kin. Perhaps I will be able to know where the ground spikes will come from!

IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS KILL KILL THE DEFIER IT HAS REJECTED ITS HOME KILL IT KILL ME KILL ME PLEASE IT HURTS IT HURTS LONDON LONDON LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN MY FAIR LADY LONDON- I sever the link, shaking my head.

WHAT IS THE KIN THINKING ABOUT!?

It forms more ground spikes, launching them towards me while making blood spears and stabbing at Sariel, forcing her to dodge back just as she was about to get close. I run to the side, piercing my tentacles into another building and yank myself up towards it to dodge the spikes flying towards me. While I do this, I develop scything tentacles and stab them into the air beside me!

[Space Warping (Minor Teleportation)] [Core Energy Remaining: 83%]

The kin screams as the scything tentacles stab into its side, but *pain*! as a blood spear slices away the tentacle that had pierced it. And…

The severed tentacle wriggles before it is absorbed by the kin's body, and… is consumed by IT!?

COWARDICE! DO NOT STEAL MY BIOMASS!

Sariel runs forward, her eyes glowing as she claws her hand through the sky. The kin is slammed into the ground with telekinesis, but it shrieks and rolls away, its tentacles slamming against the ground to push it away from her. A ground spike stabs up at her from underneath her feet, but Sariel manages to throw herself to the side before it can pierce her.

Space warp stab! I send my tentacles stabbing into the air around me, attempting to pierce the kin as it rolls on the ground. But just before my tentacles can pierce this strange kin the ground raises around it, forming small walls that block my tentacles. They bounce off of the ground it had raised, wasting the core energy I had used to teleport them.

I HATE THIS KIN! HATE IT!

I drop back down to the ground, warily circling the kin around its walls. It hides like a *coward.*

"London bridge is falling down…" The kin whispers from behind the walls it had made, and I growl as I repair my body. 36% of it has been destroyed, and the armor is cracked in places. "Build it up with rock and stone…"

JJ, are you alright? Sariel asks over the link, and I snort.

I am fine. Worry about your inferior design. It is far more vulnera-

INSTINCT! DODGE!

[Core Energy Remaining: 76%**]**

"LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN!" The kin screams, and I feel something inside of me *snap* as the walls it had made explode outwards, sharp spikes whistling through the air towards me and Sariel.

[Body Transformation (Mist)]

The **instinct** takes over as I use the Trial Kin's *coward* ability. Reluctant, but…

EFFECTIVE!

The sharp wall pieces pierce my body, but there is no pain as it passes through the mist. It is strange. I cannot see, yet I can sense everything around me. My Core energy is rapidly depleting, but I know I cannot be harmed. There are grey shapes that my fog curls around. One I recognize as the kin's, its tentacles disturbing the mist as vibrations travel through me. It is still talking.

Another form I can sense is Sariel's, and she…

Is wounded.

Smug.

Inferior design. But… sigh. Gaster will not like it if she dies, and the kin prey is turning its tentacles towards her and-

Freeze.

Gaster is runNING TOWARDS US! NO, STOP IT GASTER YOU WILL DIE!

THE KIN IS TURNING A TENTACLE TOWARDS GASTER!

I pull my mist back together, forming right behind the kin. It hurriedly turns to look at me, but it is too slow!

[Electrokinesis (Minor)]

I snarl as electricity forms around my claws, and I *stab* my hand into its chest. The kin screams as electricity burns it, its body going rigid. But I grunt as my hand is severed inside of the Kin. I try to move back but the kin grabs my arm, its tentacles wrapping around my body and it pulls me closer. I flail and bite and stab it with my tentacles, but it does not let go!

"Kill kill **kill** KILL **ME KILL ME *KILL ME***!" It shrieks. "**LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN KILL ME BUILD IT UP-**"

All of its tentacles turn towards me. The **instinct** is screaming at me to DODGE BUT I CANNOT DODGE IT IS TOO CLOSE AND THE KIN HAS GRABBED MY ARM-

"***-WITH BLOOD. AND. BONE***!"

PAAAAAAIIIIN!!!!

BLOOD SPIKES HAVE PIERCED THE MAIN BODY AND THE BRAIN, 73% DESTROYED STAB WITH TENTACLES ***PAAAAINNN*** MORE BLOOD SPIKES STAB RIP TEAR CRUSH BITE SCRATCH BUT ALL I FEEL IS

FEAR

I am going to die.

THE KIN KEEPS TAKING MY BIOMASS TO REPLENISH ITSELF NO MATTER HOW MUCH I HURT IT I CANNOT-

"FUCK YOU!" Sariel screams, electricity burning through the air as she stabs her poking instrument into it. The kin prey goes rigid and Gaster smashes its head with a piece of rock IT STILL HURTS I'M STILL IN **PAIN MUST CONSUME DEVOUR REPLENISH BIOMASS!**

I **devour** the kin. All of its tentacles, its blood, its flesh.

DISGUSTING! BUT I AM ALIVE!

WIIIIGLE! THANK YOU FOR KILLING IT GASTER!

[Core Energy Remaining: 49%]

I sit on the ground, absorbing the biomass and repairing the main body as fast as possible. Sariel looks at me, panting. She is holding a hand over a wound on her stomach, and I can see a ground spike sticking out of her back and her leg. Gaster is looking at us both, his hands trembling as he holds up a large piece of ground with blood on it.

"I... I k-killed it." He whispers. "I killed it and you a-ate it..."

Yes Gaster! You helped! A wonderful display of non-cowardice!

And… reluctant. So did Sariel. Maybe I do not hate her. She is not a coward.

And to make it even better, the Kin had three cores! Mine!

"I-I sh-should call 91-911." Gaster says, his voice just as shaky as his hands as he drops the ground he was holding and raises a hand to his circlet. Then he pauses, running over to the side and spitting out biomass from his mouth. Hmm... strange. Is this how humans celebrate their kills?

Sariel grunts as she sits down onto the ground, blood flowing out from her leg and her stomach as she tears off a piece of her hoodie and wraps it tightly around her wounds.

"That adrenaline rush come-down is rough the first time. Just puke it out Gaster." She says quietly. "But thanks for saving us. Holy fucking shit I can't believe that happened in the *city*. What even *was* that thing? It didn't look like a normal Rift Entity." She asks, but Gaster is too busy celebrating his first kill by expelling biomass from his mouth, bent over with his hands on his knees. A strange form of celebration, but it will do! "I would say that we should hand it over, but…" She glances at the clothes on the ground. They are all that remains of the kin.

I burp. "Thanks doc." I say happily, and Sariel looks at me, her brows furrowed. I frown. "What?"

She only looks at me for a few moments before shrugging. "Nothing." She says, turning her head to look at Gaster. He has finally finished his celebration, and he wipes his mouth as he taps his circlet.

"Y-yes hello, I n-need an ambulance at… oh, they're already on the way? Okay, thank you."

I frown, my ears twitching. It sounds like there are footsteps approaching, and I raise my eye tentacles to look. I see two people wearing black clothes entering the area, stepping over pieces of broken ground and the bodies of people. Their faces are covered, and they tap on their necks.

"Test was a hesitant success, though it was taken down by locals." One of them whispers, and I frown again. Sariel also turns to look at them, groaning in pain as she stands up.

"Listen you two, we don't know if it's safe here. There are still possible threats, you should evacuate... immedia...tely..." She pauses as the two new people raise their hands. Strange, they are holding structures that resemble...

BOOOM!

LOUD! LOUD LOUD, LOUD LIKE THE STRUCTURES HUMANS USED IN THE FOREST! Gaster falls to the ground in a spray of blood, his eyes wide as he looks down at his shoulder.

A part of his shoulder is gone, and the side of his chest is completely open.

"GASTER!" Sariel screams, **instinct DODGE!**

I roll away as another **booom** comes, looking up to see the two people in black clothes aiming weapons at us. I look at them, then at Gaster. He is lying still, like Ground-Walker was when the loud came in the woods.

I look back at the people.

"May our Hands guide you to the Makers." One of them says, raising their structure again.

RAGE.

I ESTABLISH THE LINK.

"I WILL RIP YOUR SPINE OUT OF YOUR THROAT AND WRAP YOUR INTESTINES AROUND IT!"

[Psionic Assault]

The two humans stagger, and I raise my TENTACLES TO PIERCE-

BOOOM BOOM!

The two humans collapse to the ground. I crouch low and turn back to look at where the new LOUDS came from, and see a nuan standing there, panting as he holds a smaller version of the structures the people had. He looks at us, then at Gaster. Sariel is crouched over him, holding her hands over his wound.

"Fucking Hands of the Makers." The nuan growls, putting the structure away and running towards Gaster. "Fuck I'm sorry it took so long for me to get here, I kept trying to fight through the crowd and... oh shit."

"GASTER! GASTER STAY WITH ME! YOU'RE NOT GOING TO FUCKING DIE LIKE THIS, DO YOU HEAR ME!?" Sariel screams, pressing her hands tight on his shoulder.

But there is something strange about him.

His wound is closing, and his body has grown rigid. And his eyes have gone completely black, and there are black veins all around his eyes and neck.

The new nuan taps his circlet, looking at Gaster as Sariel rips her shirt off and hurriedly ties it around Gaster's shoulder. "This is Detective Caliban, code 323. We need an ambulance at... well tell them to hurry the fuck up then!" There is something in the nuan's voice. It feels like hatred, but also concern. He looks around, and I look with him.

The people who are still alive, but wounded, are just like Gaster. Their eyes are completely black, their mouths wide open as their wounds heal, their veins black and bulging as well.

"The victims are mutating."

Chapter 38: Wounds of the Heart

Sariel has her head in her arms, her knees hugged close to her chest. Joey is standing with his back leaning on the wall, his arms crossed. Mom is sitting next to Sariel, gently rubbing her back.

It turns out that the human anatomy's tear glands can be activated during emotional distress. A strange function, but I think it is to help other humans to know when they are in an unstable mental state.

"It's going to be alright Sarah." Mom says, though her voice shakes in a way that makes me think she isn't too sure herself. But it isn't a lie, technically. "Gaster is a tough boy."

"It's my fault." Sariel whispers. She has stopped 'crying', but her voice is hoarse. "If I had read their minds before-"

"It's no one's fault but theirs." Mom interrupts, and Sariel nods slowly, though I cannot see her face to see if she believes mom or not.

We have been waiting at an ' emergency hospital' for a few hours now. Apparently it is different from the doctor's office. Joey sighs and uncrosses his arms, sitting down next to me with a grunt.

"How're yeh feelin kiddo?" He asks me, and I shrug.

"I have healed my wounds." I respond, and Joey nods. "Gaster's wounds were also healed, before he was taken here. Should he not be alright?"

Joey opens his mouth to answer, then closes it and shakes his head. He leans back in the seat and crosses his arms again. "Have yeh ever seen a mutation, kiddo?" He asks, and I shake my head. The Cored members of the pack had already mutated before I was brought to them, and no new mutations had taken place while I was with them. "Good. Frankly, it's… a traumatic experience, for the one involved."

I tilt my head curiously. "Traumatic?" I ask, not quite sure of the meaning, and Joey nods.

"Aye." He confirms quietly. "A mutation will heal the person involved,

if they were hurt prior to it. But from what I've heard, it's an extremely painful process. I don't know the specifics, but the body pretty much eats itself from the inside out to form the Core and repair itself from fatal injury. It's a dangerous process, and one that can be fatal if anything goes wrong."

Hmm… "What could go wrong?" I question, and Joey shrugs.

"Lots of things. Not enough nutrients in the body to sustain the mutation, for one. And if any additional harm comes to the mutant involved during the change, it tries to compensate for it. But it's not smart about it, so sometimes it overreacts." He clenches his jaw, his hands tightening on his arms. "But Gasty's mutation will be fine. It'll be fine." He repeats, and I nod.

"It will be fine." I repeat, hoping to encourage Joey. He turns to look at me, then chuckles softly and ruffles my hair.

"No touch!" I complain, and Joey grins.

"I'm going to get some snacks. Anyone want anything?" He asks, and I nod hurriedly.

"Protein bars!" I exclaim, and he nods before looking at Sariel and mom.

"Sarah? Love?" He implores, and mom shakes her head.

"No, thank you." She replies quietly, looking at the doors that lead further into the hospital. Sariel doesn't even respond, which is rude, but I suppose it is acceptable. Mind-Walker also acted this way whenever one of the pack members got hurt.

Joey walks away, and I wait patiently for him to return. But mom turns from looking at the door to me.

"JJ, you said that when the other person showed up, the one who killed the people who did this, he called them the Hands?" She asks, and I nod.

I develop the songbird syrinx. "Fucking Hands of the Makers." I mimic his voice, and mom's jaw clenche-

PREDATOR

I flinch, the **fear** washing over me. But I know mom is not expressing hostility at me, so I force the **instinct** to run away. "Are they bad?" I ask, and mom takes a deep breath. The **predator** feeling is gone.

"Yes. Yes they are." Is all she responds with, and I nod again.

"I thought they were wiped out." Sariel whispers, finally raising her head from her knees. Her eyes are red, and a little puffy, and she looks confused. "Our school said that the RCO purged all of their members."

Mom seems to hesitate, before shaking her head. "They were driven out of the major union cities, but… they still pop up in border settlements every now and then. Wherever RCO or the BA don't have a presence at." She answers, and I tilt my head in confusion. Another thing I must ask about later.

Sariel clenches her hands tight. "Do you think they had something to do with the Rift Entity that got into the city?" She asks, and mom nods again.

"It's too coincidental for them to be there at the same time the Entity wa-"

She cuts off as the double doors open, and we all turn to see a man in a white coat walking through them, looking at all of us for a few moments. Mom and Sariel both breathe in relief as the 'doctor' smiles.

"The mutation event has finished. Gaster is stable." He says, and mom stands up hurriedly.

"Can we see him?" She asks, and the doctor nods, holding open the door.

"You can, but he's exhausted. We hooked him up to an IV and a nutrient drip to replenish some of what he's lost, but he'll probably be out cold within the next hour or so." He says, and Sariel and I stand up as mom taps her circlet, informing Joey of Gaster's recovery.

He is back in less than a minute, sprinting through the halls with

protein bars in hand and breathing roughly. He tosses me a protein bar and I tear it open to devour it.

So hungry, and so *good!*

"If you all wouldn't mind following me, I can take you to him." The doctor says, and we do so as he walks back through the double doors. We go through a long hallway, with lots of people in white coats and purple uniforms walking around. My ears flick as I can hear faint screams coming from different hallways.

"I'm going to be perfectly honest," the doctor says to mom and Joey as we walk, "your son is extremely lucky. It's been a long time since our hospital has dealt with a mass mutation. But he pulled through with no complications. Others… well, as I said, your son got lucky."

Mom and Joey both nod, while Sariel looks pale. "But he's fine?" She asks, and the doctor nods.

"His mutation wasn't as violent as some others were, strangely enough. Especially considering what the trigger event was. Oh, and…" He comes to a stop out front of a door, and we stop with him. "Though energy readings aren't stable this soon after a mutation, early tests show him as a class 3. I would say congratulations, but that would be in poor taste."

So Gaster is still weaker than me. *Smug.* But at least now he will be able to defend himself!

Mom and Joey both nod, and the doctor knocks on the door. He opens it slightly, peeking his head inside. "Gaster, you've got some visitors." He says, then steps aside so we can enter the room. We do so, and…

I pause.

Gaster looks very different. Before, he had very sufficient fat reserves on his body. But he has lost most of it, so much that he looks like the members of the pack who would get sick and couldn't eat. His cheeks are sunken, and there are deep bags under his eyes.

But he smiles, and waves. "Hey guys."

"Gaster!" Sariel exclaims, rushing forward and hugging him across the bed. He winces, but laughs and pats her back. "I thought… I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry I couldn't stop…" She cuts off as she starts to cry, her shoulders shaking, and Gaster only continues to pat her back.

"Hey mom, dad. Little bro." He says, and mom is the first one after Sariel to approach. She also seems to be on the verge of crying, her lips trembling as she walks to the other side of his bed and touches him. On his face, his forehead, his hair. She cups his cheeks with her hands, and plants kisses all over it. He begins to protest, but the protest dies underneath the weight of every kiss.

"H…" Joey starts, then clears his throat. I turn to look at him, and…

JOEY IS ALSO CRYING!?

Why is everyone crying!?

"Hey kiddo." Joey finally finishes, small tears in the corners of his eyes as he smiles. "Looks like yeh lost a lot of the Gruschwald weight. Yeh know your mom's going to feed yeh till yeh pop when yeh get home, right?"

Gaster laughs, though the sound is muffled from underneath mom's face as she rubs it with her cheek. "I know, and I'm not dying or anything! You're being really weird mom."

"Hush." She scolds, still rubbing his face with her cheek. "You're going to take my affection like a good son would. I was worried I wouldn't get to do this again."

Gaster sighs, then peeks at me through the dreads of mom's hair. "You've got chocolate on your face JJ." He laughs, pointing, and I lick my lips as I tilt my head.

"Gaster, your fingers are different." I state, and everyone pauses. He looks at his hands as mom and Sariel both lean back to look at them too. He suddenly looks embarrassed, and tries to hide his fingers underneath the blanket, but mom snatches one of his hands to study them.

"Hey!" He complains, but we all continue looking over them as mom

holds his fingers up. Rather than brown like the rest of his body, his fingers have become clear, made of a substance I don't recognize. They still hold a normal finger's shape, but the material is clearly different. They sparkle slightly in the light of the room, and mom rubs his fingers with her own.

"A visible side effect of his mutation." A voice says behind us, and I turn to see the doctor standing there. "A portion of his chest and shoulder, where his wound was, is also made of the same material. Though it's not transparent like his fingers are."

Sariel reaches to pull his shirt to the side, then stops just before she can and pulls back. The hospital room becomes flooded with her pheromones, and I frown.

Control yourself Sariel!

Mom finishes the job for her, pulling the collar of his shirt down. It reveals a portion of his chest. Just like his fingers, his brown skin stops abruptly, replaced by an almost clear, but slightly cloudy, material. The cloudiness swirls slightly, and Gaster pushes mom's hands away. His face is red, and he looks embarrassed.

"I guess it's super noticeable, huh." He mumbles, and Joey nods.

"It is, but it's nothing to be ashamed about. As far as visible mutations go, I'd say yours is pretty fahkin cool looking." He says. Gaster still looks embarrassed, but he smiles slightly.

"Do you know what your Core ability does yet?" Sariel asks, and he shakes his head, though his embarrassment turns into consideration.

"Not specifically, but… I don't know, it's like I have a feeling of what it should do…" He frowns, scratching his head. "It's hard to describe."

"Instinct." I say helpfully. Mom and Sariel nod.

"That's the best way to put it, I think." Mom says. "You won't know for sure until you try, but every Core user has a rough idea of what their ability does."

Gaster nods along, raising his hand to study his fingers. He turns

them in the light, than looks around the room. At first Sariel, then at me, then Joey. Until finally, his gaze rests on mom.

"Mom, dad." He says, looking between both of them. "I know that this is going to seem pretty sudden, but I had a little bit of time before they let you guys in here. To run tests and stuff. And I was thinking, I mean I've always thought it, if I somehow ever developed a Core or…" He trails off, his voice growing quieter with every word.

"What's up kiddo?" Joey asks, and Gaster takes a deep breath. His hands tighten, and he looks at both of them.

"I want to go to the Academy with JJ and Sariel."

Aurora hated it here.

She hated the stuffy air, the tacky inspirational pictures hanging up on the wall. She hated the way the couch she sat on enveloped her. But most of all, she hated the person sitting across from her.

Her stupid, sympathetic expression. Her dumb voice, the tone she used. Like how someone might talk to an injured dog.

"Aurora, I recognize that you have a certain… distaste for your meetings with me." The woman said, and Aurora snorted, rolling her eyes.

Yeah, dislike. That's putting it mildly. She thought, and the woman only smiled. That was what she hated the most. Her fucking smile.

"But our meetings are necessary. Not because the Academy requires me to guarantee you are mentally sound to attend." The woman, Doctor Kayeera, continued quietly. "And not because your mom pays for each session. It's necessary, because I want to help you."

"I don't need any fucking help." Aurora snapped, crossing her arms over her chest. Her leg bounced, her boot creating a steady *bum bum bum* against the floor. "I'm not going to have a mental breakdown or anything like that."

Kayeera nodded slowly, and leaned back, crossing her fingers in her

lap. "I didn't think you were going to." She said. "But what do you think you need, if help isn't it?"

Aurora clenched her jaw. "I think I need to get out of this fucking office before I break something." She growled, turning her gaze to the side.

"And do you think that breaking something would be productive?" She asked patiently, and Aurora shrugged.

"I dunno, maybe. It sounds like a good idea right about now."

Kayeera nodded slowly once more, her eyes looking around her office before settling on something. She leaned across her seat and plucked a picture frame from her desk, inspecting it before holding it out to Aurora. "Here you go."

Aurora froze, her gaze snapping back to look at the doctor and then lowering to the picture frame. Her leg stopped bouncing, her eyes narrowing. "What?"

Kayeera pushed the picture frame further out in front of her, nodding towards it. "This. You can break it, if you want."

Aurora's eyebrows raised, her lips twitching in disbelief. "Are you fucking crazy?" She asked, and Kayeera hummed for a few moments.

"Maybe just a little?" She said, smiling lightly, and waved the picture frame in the air. "Take it. You can throw it against the wall, on the floor. You can snap it across your knee if you'd like. You could even throw it at me, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't."

Aurora studied her for a few moments, before snatching it out of her hands. "You're serious?" She asked, and the doctor nodded, gesturing for her to go ahead. Aurora's eyes narrowed again, and she looked down, turning the frame over in her hands to look at the picture held inside of it. It was of a young woman smiling out at the viewer. She was pretty enough, and resembled the doctor in a way that only family could. "Who is this, your daughter?"

The doctor laughed. "That hurts. You think I look old enough to have a daughter that age?" She asked, and Aurora shrugged. "No, it's my

younger sister."

Aurora pursed her lips, her finger brushing along the glass of the frame. "You don't like this picture or something?" She questioned, and Kayeera shook her head.

"I love that picture. It's probably my favorite thing in this office." She answered, and Aurora scoffed.

"Then why the fuck are you telling me to break it?" She snapped, tossing the frame back to Kayeera who caught it deftly in her hands. She studied it for a few moments, looking back up at Aurora.

"So you're not going to break it?" She asked, and Aurora rolled her eyes.

"No, of course I'm not going to break it if it's important to you." She huffed, and Kayeera smiled, nodding as she placed it back on her desk. "So what was that, like a test or something? 'Let's see if the crazy bitch actually breaks it'?"

The doctor shook her head again, once more clasping her hands in her lap. "No, I meant what I said. If you had broken it I probably would have been sad, but I would have forgiven you. I gave you full permission to do so after all."

Aurora paused again, her brows furrowing. "Why?"

Kayeera gazed at her, then leaned forward. "I just realized that in the past sessions we've had together, we have always done this my way. Clearly my way isn't working, and I can't help you if you keep me outside of the walls you have built. This was the first time you've ever expressed a desire of any kind, so I wished to fulfill it."

*This bitch is fucking **weird**.* Aurora thought to herself.

"I don't need any help." She repeated, though with a bit less hostility than before, and Kayeera nodded.

"You're right. You don't need help." She agreed, but her eyes softened. "But it's not you who is asking me for help. Your mom is asking me for help. Your friends. You're in pain, clearly, and they don't know

what to do to make it better. But I can't make them understand what would make it better, for you. Only you can."

Aurora hated the swallow she had to take. "Yeah, okay. Alright. But there's not jack shit anyone can *do* to make it *better*. There is no better, after being dead. There's only-" She choked off, angrily wiping her eyes.

"Only…" Kayeera gently urged, and Aurora took a deep breath.

"Look, my friends are dead. It sucks, and I miss them. Every fucking day, I miss them." She whispered. "They were killed by some fucking monster in a forest somewhere, and I ran. Like a fucking *coward* I ran, because I was scared I was going to get killed too. There is nothing *better* after all your friends are dead. There's only the pain left afterwards."

The doctor listened as she spoke. And when Aurora was done, the doctor didn't say anything for a few moments. "Different doctors specialize in treating different wounds." She finally began. "Surgeons, for instance, specialize in treating wounds of the body. I specialize in healing wounds of the heart."

Aurora snorted derisively. "Please spare me from your tacky, corny speeches." She said, and Kayeera laughed.

"Alright, I'll scrap that whole speech I had planned." She said, though the humor left her tone, replaced by care and concern. "But it's true. You have experienced something that very few people can even imagine. And because they can't even imagine it, they don't know what to do or say that won't hurt you. They don't even realize it, but their sympathy can be painful, can't it?"

Aurora hesitated for a few moments, but nodded. "Yeah. It fucking sucks. And it sucks more that I can't explain to them why." She admitted softly, and Kayeera uncrossed her fingers.

"So let me teach you how. You don't need help, Aurora, but I do think that you need someone who knows how to listen. To really listen, and understand what you're saying, because the absence left behind by the death of friends is something very hard to process without

someone who understands."

Aurora hesitated again. She knew that everything Kayeera was doing was her training. But for the first time, she felt like she was talking to someone who *understood*.

"Have you lost someone too?" She asked, so very quietly, and Kayeera nodded. She turned to look behind her, and Aurora followed her gaze to settle on the picture frame. The one she had considered breaking.

"She was an Academy selectee." Kayeera murmured. "She would have started last year. But something went wrong during a training exercise, and she disappeared. Her and her entire squad."

Aurora bit her bottom lip, then took a deep breath. "Okay." She relented, and Kayeera turned back to look at her.

"Okay?" She asked, and Aurora nodded.

"How do I start?"

Chapter 39: Fortunate Son

Hastin awoke to the regular morning routine he was always used to.

A flurry of movement, multiple doors opening and closing outside of his room, the rustling of sheets and quiet, overly feminine voices arguing over who got to use the showers first.

He stretched out over his bed, taking a sniff as he did so and wrinkling his nose.

Laundry hadn't been done yet.

Ever since reaching Class Four, he could smell the odor of sweat-stained sheets from the other rooms, even from his own. What he wouldn't have given to return to the bliss of class three senses.

Taking his time, he languidly sat up and yawned, tossing the blanket off of his body and swinging his feet over the side of the bed. He opened the drawer of his night stand and plucked out a box of cigarettes, tapping one out and grabbing the baby blue lighter next to it.

Putting it to his mouth, he struck the flint of his lighter. Once, twice and a third time, but all he got in return for his efforts were sparks.

"Guess today's an unlucky day." He grumbled, then jumped. Just as the words had left his mouth, he heard a small thud bounce off of the glass of his window. He hurriedly turned and heard further cursing from the street below. He stood up and strode up to his window, throwing open the curtains.

"Didn't I tell you we were *done* the next time I caught you smoking that shit?" The muffled voice of a woman filtered through his window, and he glanced down from his second story view to see a nuan girl cursing at a human man, who was looking down at his hand with a frown on his face.

"Did you really have to fucking smack the lighter out of my hand though?" He snapped, and Hastin glanced at his window sill, spotting

a cheap black lighter resting there. Grinning, he opened up his window and snatched up the lighter, sparking it and lighting his cigarette as he leaned out to enjoy the show.

Today's a lucky day after all.

"You promised you would quit! You're *lucky* all I did was smack it away." The nuan girl snapped, crossing her arms over her chest and spinning around. The man sighed, tossing away his unlit cigarette and walking up to her.

"I'm sorry, baby girl. I was just stressed from yesterday's job. Give me another chance." He murmured, wrapping his arms around her. She looked reluctant, but eventually turned around in his embrace. Hastin grinned, bringing his cigarette to his mouth. A drama this early in the morning?

He took a drag of his cig, breathing out smoke just as he heard small footsteps approaching his door. He turned his head as the person outside of it knocked.

"Has, you up yet?" His mom called, and he took another drag.

"Yeah mom, I'm up." He called back, flicking his cigarette out of the window and closing it, but not before seeing it bounce off of the human man's shoulder. He grinned as the girl jumped, drawing his curtains closed.

"Remember, you've got a busy day today! You're supposed to meet with your Academy Liason." His mom reminded him through his door. "Make sure you wear something nice. I reserved one of the showers for you, and Marie said she'd be making a special breakfast."

"Thanks mom." He replied, walking over to his closet, snagging a towel and his shower bucket. He waited until her footsteps faded away before opening his door, stepping out of his room and closing the door behind him. He saw a small line outside of the bathroom, women of differing races, sizes, and figures shifting on their feet. He smirked as he walked straight past the line, their boos and jeers music to his ears as he paused in the doorway of the bathroom.

"Sorry everyone, I'm super important now." He hummed, then yelped as one of them threw a shampoo bottle at his head.

"Shut the fuck up Has!" She snapped, earning cheers and laughs as he ducked into the bathroom to escape the bombardment of shower essentials coming his way. The steam curling into the changing room was thick, the heat enveloping him pleasantly even before he fully entered it.

Changing out of his clothes, he walked past a row of closed shower curtains before claiming the only empty one. He hung up his towel on a hook, and one of the curtains opened, a young woman with wet brown hair poking her head out of it to look at him.

"Hastin, can I borrow your conditioner?" She whispered loudly over the hiss of hot water, and he sighed exaggeratedly.

"It was fifteen stills…" He trailed off, mockingly mournful, and she rolled her eyes.

"Oh whatever, I let you use my deodorant last week when you ran out, remember?." She huffed, and he clicked his tongue, hooking his conditioner out of his bucket and passing it over. "Thanks!"

"Yeah yeah, just pass it back over when you're done."

She gave him a thumbs up, slipping back into her stall, and he turned on his water.

Freshly showered and in comfortable but nice clothing, he walked out of the changing room. The line outside of the shower was smaller now, but that earned him no fewer glares than before. He stuck out his tongue at them and they did the same, before giggling as he walked past them back to his room.

Tossing his towel and bucket in a corner, he opened up his small jewelry box and put in a dagger earring, slipping a few rings onto his fingers and checking himself in the mirror. Slicking back his pale white hair, he nodded to himself.

Perfectly presentable.

He slipped his lucky coin from his drawer into his pocket and walked back out of his room, clambering down the stairs. The tantalizing scent of eggs, sausage, and bagels called to him from the kitchen, nearly irresistible. He walked in and saw his mom and Marie cooking at the stove, fresh plates of breakfast already laying on the counter behind them. His mom, always somehow able to sense when he walked in, turned her head and gave him a smile.

"Well don't you look nice." She hummed as he walked up, pecking him on the cheek and scraping out a fresh set of eggs and sausages onto a plate, passing it over to him. "For my handsome boy. There's some bagels and cream cheese too, if you want it."

He grinned, sitting down at the counter and grabbing one of the communal forks. "Thanks mom." He said, digging in. Marie slid over a plate of cream cheese ladened bagels, her blonde curls bouncing slightly as she looked him over with a smile.

"Did your mom tell you the news?" She asked, and he shook his head, taking a bite of his bagel. "You're getting assigned as a temporary team lead!"

"Marie, that was supposed to be a surprise." His mom chided, clicking her tongue. Her pointed ears flicked in annoyance, while he perked up.

"Really?" He asked, and though his mom looked cross with Marie, she couldn't stop the proud smile from creeping onto her face.

"Really. I talked with your new team's parents over a call. They were absolutely lovely, but they're in Sacison, so you'll have to go down there for a week." She hummed, and he paused.

"I have to leave Niminir?" He asked hesitantly. His mom, seeming to sense his unease, paused her cooking to turn around and look at him.

"I know, I know. But the Liason stated that he'd accompany you there, and the trip is entirely Academy funded." She said, and he nodded. He still seemed remarkably unenthused though, and his mom ruffled his hair.

"Mom!" He grumbled, swatting her hand away, and she giggled.

"It'll be fun, you'll see." She promised, and he sighed.

"But I had a date planned later this week…" He grumbled, and immediately regretted it as soon as his mom perked up.

"Oh? And who's the girl? Do I know her? Oh, is she from your school? Is it that Trixie you were talking about last week?" She began her barrage of questions, and he coughed slightly, hurriedly standing up and cramming the rest of his bagel into his mouth.

"Gotta go! Love you!" He called, escaping from the kitchen as his mom called for him to come back. He could see the other girls of the house replacing the scented candles in the hall and side rooms, pulling off old sheets and replacing them with new ones. A few looked up to give him a wave and a smile, a few who knew about his meeting giving him a farewell thumbs up.

Stepping out of the townhouse into the busy city streets of Niminir, he was immediately blanketed by the deafening noise of rumbling car engines and cascading footsteps. Tapping on his circlet, he pulled up his Liason's contact info and gave him a call. He was immediately met with an overly cheerful voice.

"Mr. Naurin!" The Liason greeted. "I was just about to call you. I'm sure your mother informed you of our meeting today, but I wanted to confirm the time. Does 1100 still work for you?"

Hastin checked the time, still only 0943, but he nodded. "That time works perfectly." He answered, already planning ways to fill out the remaining time.

"And can I expect that the coffee shop is still a good meeting spot?" The Liason asked, to which Hastin grinned.

"As long as you're still paying." He got a chuckle in response.

"Of course. I'll see you there."

-

Hastin took a sip of his latte, savoring the white mocha flavor he'd ordered. The Liason, a human man with light blue hair, was sitting across from him while taking a sip of his own black coffee.

"I hope no one has spoiled the surprise." He hummed, and Hastin chuckled awkwardly, scratching his cheek. The Liason blinked, before shaking his head ruefully. "Well, I suppose they have. Still, to make it official…"

The Liason dug around in his pocket before pulling out a small ribbon, placing it onto the table and sliding it over to Hastin. "Congratulations! You have been assigned as a temporary team lead for two other Academy Selectees. We're working on filling out the third position, the Rift Expert, but for now we're already planning a training exercise before you start your semester at the Academy."

Hastin took the ribbon graciously, a proud smile on his face. "I don't know what made you decide to pick me as team lead, but thank you." He said, and the Liason waved a hand in the air.

"No no, thank *you.* It's not often that the Academy has the opportunity to study an Origin Core ability, so we are truly gratefulthat you have given us the chance to study it in the field." The Liason said, to which Hastin nodded slowly. That had always been the conditions of his scholarship, that and the fact he had reached Class Four.

"So, who will I be taking the lead of?" He asked, and the Liason paused slightly. Hastin wasn't sure if he quite liked that pause.

"Erm… well, I'll be the first to admit that your team will be a bit… *unique*, to say the least." He admitted, tapping his circlet and sending the relevant information to Hastin, who looked it over curiously.

"Let's see here…" He murmured, scrolling through the file. "Aurora Furliah. Nuan, mutated, class two, core ability is Hyper Reflex." He didn't quite know the specifics of the ability, but knew it was a cat

one and affected the nervous and muscle system. "Mutated as of Maura 3rd, immediately enrolled into the Academy Selectee training program. And…" He paused, frowning as he looked at the Liason. "Why is her previous team's status classified?"

The Liason's smile broke for just a moment, but he shook his head. "I'm unable to elaborate on that, I'm afraid. But her experience is exemplary, as is her ability, that I have received much assurance about."

Hastin nodded hesitantly, scrolling past her information to the other's. "Joey Wa-... Waffles?" He again paused, a disbelieving laugh bubbling out as he looked at the Liason as if it was some sort of joke. But the smile on the Liason's face was ever present, making Hastin realize that it *wasn't* a joke. "Ooookay. Joey Waffles. Human, Gifted, class four- class four!?"

The Liason nodded. "He is the second class four that will be attending this semester, besides you." He elaborated, to Hastin's confusion.

"Why was he not made a team lead then?"

The Liason hesitated, then shrugged. "I'm… not too sure, actually. From what the Liason in Sacison has told me, his circumstances are unordinary. He had been living in a border settlement until fairly recently, so his judgment and education are still under review."

Hastin pursed his lips, rubbing his temples, but eventually shrugged and continued on. "Class four, category six. Cat one capabilities, other categories not verified." He read, tilting his head slightly. "A cat six huh?"

The Liason nodded. "You see now why we needed you specifically to become a team lead. From what I've been told, his combat capabilities are extraordinary, so another Class Four is needed to ensure he remains in control."

Hastin let out a slow breath, but eventually seemed to accept his strange new responsibilities. "You mentioned a training exercise. How soon would I leave?" He asked, and the Liason smiled. Though there was something in his smile that he wasn't sure he liked.

"Well… in about two hours, if you're alright with it?" He suggested, and Hastin nodded before the words could fully register. When they did, he slammed his hand onto the table.

"Two hours!?"

Chapter 40: An Oddly Familiar Face

"If she says anything mean to you, and I mean *anything*, you just let me know okay?" Mom says. She is displaying annoyed behaviors, but also protective ones. Though it is a good feeling to have someone be protective, I still sigh. She has said this exact same thing three times now.

"I will mom." I agree. I have found that it is better to simply agree with her as many times as it takes, and she nods. Though she doesn't look any happier.

"I can't believe they put you in the same team as Aurora." She huffs, pulling into the "parking spot" and turning the car off. "You probably don't know this, but she's been picking on Gaster since he entered middle school. I know she's probably changed since…" Mom trails off, her lips pursing.

"Picking on?" I ask, and mom shakes her head.

"It just means she wasn't very nice to him. So again, if she says anything mean to you, you call me immediately. Got it?" She asks, and I nod again. Four times now.

"Can I eat her if she's mean to me?" I ask, and mom laughs. Then she seems to have thought about something, because she looks at me with a very serious expression.

"No. No eating people." I try not to feel too disappointed, I should have known that the answer would be no. We both look up and see Leo waving from the entrance of the "train station", and mom unlocks the door. "Alright hun, you go and have a fun exercise. Stay safe, and listen to your Liaison."

I nod, getting out of the car and closing the door behind me. I press my ears flat as the deafening noise of the city once again causes pain in the auditory nervous system. I have thought about removing the structure while we are in the city, but…

Frustration! It is such a useful addition to human anatomy!

I decide to keep it active, and keep my ears flat as I approach Leo. He smiles as I draw near him, though he keeps looking around.

"Hello Mr. Waffles." He greets. "You're the first to arrive, though I've received word that Ms. Zainen has been dropped off at the station already. She should be getting here shortly." I tilt my head, and he chuckles. "Aurora." He clarifies, and I nod in understanding.

"I heard she's mean." I say, and he pauses before hesitantly nodding his head.

"Yes, well… It's not my place as a Liaison to discuss behavior with a third party, but her attitude is understandable considering her circumstances." He says quietly, his voice almost drowned out by the noise around us. People are giving us curious glances as they walk past, a few of them seeming to notice Leo's clothes and whisper amongst themselves.

Hmm… so clothes can draw suspicion? Interesting. Perhaps that is why mom and Joey wanted me to change the clothes I was wearing.

"Ah, the lady in question. Hello Ms. Zainen." Leo says suddenly, looking behind me, and I turn to look as well and…

Hmm…

I tilt my head to the side. There is a nuan female standing there, wearing loose clothing with a "backpack" slung over her shoulders. Her hair is short, stopping just below her ears, and looks like a greenish-blue. Her figure is well toned, much like Sariel's is, but more than that… She looks familiar, for some reason.

She is also staring at me, her blue eyes wide and her mouth partially open. Her hands are clenched tight around the straps of her backpack, and she swallows.

"...Jack?" She whispers, and I shake my head, smiling.

"My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!" I greet, extending a hand like I've observed other people do. She stares at it for a few moments, then looks back up at my face. She blinks, her eyes squinting, before she shakes her head.

"Aurora." She introduces, but does not take my hand. I pull it back as she continues to study me for a few moments, swallowing again and shaking her head. "Sorry, you just look like someone I…" She takes a deep breath, and I shrug. It is alright if the handshake is not given! Maybe she doesn't know that it's polite to do so.

"Ms. Zainen, lovely to see you again. It's been a little while." Leo says, and Aurora nods. "As he just introduced, this here is Mr. Waffles. As per the message I sent you, he will be part of your team moving forward. I hope you two work well together."

"Right, yeah, whatever." She says, her tone aggravated. "New team, I get it. So when's the team lead getting here?"

Leo taps his circlet. "Well, not for another couple of minutes. His Liaison has informed me that their train just arrived, so they're making their way through the station now." He replies, and Aurora crosses her arms over her chest.

"So are we just waiting here, or…?" She questions, and Leo chuckles.

"We could stop in for some tea or coffee somewhere, if you'd like. My treat." Leo offers, and I hurriedly nod.

"May we also get biomass?" I ask the most important question, causing Leo to laugh again.

"We certainly can. Come on, I know a good spot where we can have some privacy to meet with your new team lead." He says, gesturing behind him, and we follow in step as he begins to walk away. I continue to study Aurora, though she seems to make it a point not to look at me.

She really does look familiar, but I cannot figure out why.

We eventually stop in front of a 'shop', where a human woman comes out to greet us with a smile. "Table for three?" She asks, and Leo returns her smile.

"For five, actually. We're expecting to meet with two more." He says, and she glances at his clothes before nodding.

"I can get you a private booth." She offers, and Leo nods.

"That would be much appreciated."

She leads us into the shop, and I lick my lips as I see people consuming biomass at the tables. The air here smells so good! We sit at a booth, Aurora taking the seat next to a window while Leo slides in next to her. I take the empty seat, and the human female places down 'menus' in front of us. "Would you like some time to look over the menu, or are you ready to order now?" She asks.

"I'd like some mint tea, please." Leo answers, and Aurora glances at him from the corner of her eye.

"You said this was on you, right?" She asks, and when he nods she picks up the menu. "Then I'd like a… white caramel mocha with a strawberry parfait."

Oh! Strawberries, mom bought those once and they were delicious!

"Alright, mint tea and a white caramel mocha with a strawberry parfait." The human female says, tapping the air before turning to me. "And what would you like sir?"

I look at the menu, humming. Yes…

I still have no idea what any of the squiggles mean!

"I wish to have what she ordered." I say, pointing at Aurora, and the female nods.

"I'll have that right out to you." She says with a smile, turning around. Aurora's eyes squint as she looks at me, and I tilt my head.

"Yes?" I ask, and she turns her head to look out of the window instead of answering. I frown. I do not think I like Aurora.

Leo clears his throat, lacing his fingers together on the table. "I'll wait to discuss specifics about the training exercise until the others arrive, so… Mr. Waffles! I hear Gaster is doing well." Leo says, and Aurora stiffens as he says the name. "From what I understand, he wishes to take the Academy Trials once he's completed his mutation

rehabilitation training."

I nod. "Mom was very upset." I confess, and Leo nods too in understanding.

"I can believe it. For a little I was worried she wouldn't allow *you* to join the Academy. Still, it would be good to have another class three applicant."

Aurora's head snaps back to look at Leo, her mouth opening. He jumps a bit in surprise, leaning back. "Gaster is class *three!?*" She hisses, and Leo hesitates before nodding.

"Y-yes, that is what his mutation placed him at." He says, and she huffs before rubbing her temples.

"Ah shit." She grumbles.

Smug. From what I have sensed of her Core, it is weaker than Gaster's is. "You will no longer be able to pick on Gaster." I gloat, and she glares at me.

"Shut it bed head." She snaps, and I bristle. I do not know what that means, but it sounded mean!

I tap my circlet, and wait a few moments.

"Yes JJ?" Mom asks over the link, and I glare at Aurora.

"Mom, what does bed head mean?" I ask, and for a few moments there is only silence over at our table. Aurora's mouth hangs open, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Did you seriously just call your fucking *mom*-"

"It just means that you haven't brushed your hair. Why do you ask JJ?" Mom questions, but before I can reply she continues on. *"Wait, did someone say something to you? Did* ***Aurora*** *say something to you?"*

I nod, before I realize she cannot see me. Idiocy.

"Yes mom, she did. Is it mean?" I ask, and Aurora shakes her head in

disbelief while Leo hangs his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

*"Well you tell her that- what? No, honey, I am **not** overreacting, I need JJ to tell her- no, don't cut the li-"* There is a boop from my circlet, and I can no longer hear mom's voice.

There is silence in the booth for a few moments. Leo hides his face in his hands, and Aurora shoots to her feet, slamming her hands on the table.

"This station is always a bit of a hassle to navigate." Hastin's Liaison says wryly, which draws a chuckle from him. "Still, I prefer it to Niminir's station. It's not nearly as crowded."

Hastin shrugs, his backpack raising with the action as he absentmindedly reaches into his jacket pocket to feel for his coin. Though he'd always felt comfortable in crowds, they were Niminir's crowds. There was just something different about each city's people, especially since most never left it once they arrived.

"I prefer the Niminir station, actually." He admitted as they passed through the congestion of bodies. "It's… I don't know. More familiar, maybe?"

The Liaison seems to consider this for a few moments, before nodding sympathetically. "That's right, I'd forgotten. You've only left Niminir once, right?" He asks, and Hastin nods back.

"Once too many." He says, only half-joking. If the Liaison caught the other, darker half to the statement, his laugh didn't show it.

"Well, you can officially mark this as trip number two. It's a good opportunity to get used to traveling, as once you graduate from the Academy and join either the Agency or RCO you'll be doing it far more often." He says, and Hastin nods reluctantly.

"If you look at it that way, I guess." He shrugs, and the Liaison taps the emblem on his uniform.

"You have to. Besides, the perks are nice. You'll be staying at a nice resort, courtesy of the Academy. Even if it's just for one night. A

shame we could only secure the training for one day, but… with everything that's been going on recently, we were lucky to get an exercise approved as is." He hums, this time Hastin nods fully. He'd heard about the reemergence of the Hands from the gossip floating around in his home. His mom in particular had nearly withdrawn her approval for his travel to Sacison when she'd heard the recent news about what had happened in the city.

Which was ironic, considering how supportive she'd been just a few hours prior to hearing it.

The duo eventually made it to the security checkpoint that led into the central hub of the station. One quick badge wave from the Liaison later, and they were allowed right through without so much as a metal detector inspection.

"We'll be stopping by the Containment Office's armory before we head to the exercise area." The Liaison says, tucking his badge back beneath his shirt. "I assume you're up to date with your firearms training, correct?"

Hastin nods, and the Liaison pauses. "Hold up, new message from the Sacison Liaison. Looks like they stopped in for some refreshments while they're waiting for us. Ohh, and it's on him." He flashes Hastin a grin. "Make sure to go all out, that cheap bastard almost never offers to pay. Let's remind him why he doesn't."

Hastin laughs, nodding easily. The increased metabolism of a Class Four had left him hungry despite the meal offered on the train, so a snack before the exercise was just what he needed.

Once again weaving their way through the crowd, they eventually found themselves outside of a quaint cafe. A waitress approaches them, and the Liaison raises a hand. "We're meeting some people here, they should already be in a booth."

The waitress taps her circlet, then flashes them a pearly white smile. "Right this way please." She says, and they follow her into the cafe. Hastin had barely entered the cafe before he hears a loud thump further in the back, jumping slightly at the noise.

"I can't believe you called your fucking *mom* on me! What are you, five!?" A loud, feminine voice yells, and Hastin glances in the direction to see a young nuan girl standing with her hands planted firmly on the table in front of her. He can't quite see who she's yelling at, but there's a human man wearing a Liaison uniform beside her, holding his face in his hands. Hastin blinks, then turns to look at his own Liaison, whose eyebrows have risen considerably. He glances around him and notices the other patrons looking at the trio with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"You said something mean! And I am *not* five. I am…" He hears another voice respond with just as much indignation as the girl's, then falter as he seems to hesitate on saying his own age. "I am fourteen!"

Hastin's Liaison clears his throat, smiling awkwardly as he looks at Hastin. "I uh… think that might be them." He says quietly, and Hastin studies the girl again. Her hair is shorter than it was in her picture, but sure enough, he recognizes her as Aurora. "So… shall we?"

They both make their way to the booth as Aurora rolls her eyes. "Oh, big *fourteen*. Well you don't act like it, you act like a fucking toddler."

"*You're* a toddler." The other voice grumbles, and the Liaison next to them finally lifts his head from his hands, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Could you please sit down Aurora? And both of you, lower your voices." He hisses, and Aurora looks around, seeming to just now notice the scene she was causing. She collapses back into her seat and crosses her arms over her chest, though not before her grey skin grows purple with shame. The duo finally arrives at the booth, and the Liaison looks up at both of them with an awkward smile.

"Ah… Hello, Carter." He greets his fellow Liaison, then turns to look at Hastin. "And you must be Mr. Illyon. Welcome to Sacison."

Hastin nodded at the Liaison. Having already seen the girl, who was glancing at him from out of the corner of her eye, he instead turned his head to study the owner of the other voice. He looked just as young as his voice had led him to believe, but there was something in

his eyes as the boy studied him that immediately put him on edge.

Before he could study further, the Liaison cleared his throat. "Now that the last member of the team has arrived, I believe introductions are in order. I am Leo Pensenata, the Academy Liaison stationed in Sacison. This is Aurora Zainen, the Front Point of your team." Leo nodded towards the girl, before gesturing to the boy. "And he is Joey Waffles, who will for now act as the Executor until further assessment. As you can see, the Rift Expert, Rear Guard, and Advance Scout positions are empty, but we're working on finding suitable candidates. Everyone, the other Liaison is Carter Halison. And this is Hastin Illyon. He will be your Team Lead."

Aurora finally turned to look at him fully, looking him over before nodding. "What's up boss man." She greets, and Hastin nods back.

"Hello!" Joey exclaims, causing Hastin to jump at the abrupt volume he was assaulted by. "My name is Joey Waffles, and I am very polite!"

Chapter 41: The Progenitor's Inheritance

It is a cruel thing, to be pushed away by those whom you love most.

It is a terrible thing, to be shunned by the very people whom you have given your hope.

And yet, we stop not to think of those who we have abandoned in this way.

Mothers to their sons, fathers to their daughters, friends to each other and lovers to their beloved.

Oh, but the masses will tell us that it is right.

That those who are different deserve to be scorned in this fashion.

But to find in your heart the will to harm those whom you love, does that not make us the very fiends we curse them to be?

The Changed are only people.

Different, yes, but only people.

And is what makes them different

Not also that which makes them beautiful?

Translation from "Of Love and Change" by nuan poet "Tiolla Pacion", 10,513 PR

It is here. Things always forgotten when coming out of stasis.

Food. Words don't understand. Interferers that bare their teeth, but not aggressively.

The feeling of contentment.

Structures that do not know how to make, but are part of the main body.

Interferers talk to the main body, offer biomass. Consume, and *wiggle*. Strange prey, but somehow not prey, makes noises while running around the main body.

The main body is called something.

Jo-

Loud.

Annoyed. Out of stasis. Do not know why annoyed.

Feel like the main body experienced something during stasis. But cannot remember.

"X5, move to testing grounds."

Gate opens. Move.

Bigger home. Develop eyes on tentacles. Observe interferers throu-

Glass. That is the name of the clear wall of home. Realization. Confusion.

Why know glass?

"...I'm sorry Doctor. I should have temrianted the test when I noticed-"

"It's alright Rose. You weren't a part of the team during the early stages of testing X1. A failure in one of the X-series projects was to be expected. X3 was falling behind in development anyways. For now, we continue with the spcemnies we still have. Commence the test against aerial coma-combatant."

Wave tentacles in air. See interferers. The Creator is touching one on the upper movement structure-

Comfort.

…

Why know it is to comfort? Why know what comfort is?

Annoyed.

Vibrations in air. *Instinct* tells me to raise tentacles higher in air. But to keep two close together, to-

Pain.

Annoyance. Was too busy thinking.

Wave tentacles in air again. **Pain** *grab, constrict,* ***crack!***

Vibrations stop. Drag prey to main body, and *consume.*

Interferers enter!

Move to home. Know to move in corner, to avoid poking instrument.

New Structures: Complete avian (Juvenile Falcon) anatomy.

PAAAAAIIIIINNNN!

BUT WHY PAIN!? NO POKING INSTRUMENTS! PAIN IN MAIN BODY, IN COR-

PAAAAIIINNN-

And no pain. But strange. Feel something. Something… other.

Kin. Kin close by.

"Devon, feed-"

Feed!

"-x5 the same amount of biomass as last…"

Move to feed.

Eat. Eat eat eat eat.

But while eating, think about change in Core. It is strange.

There are three other kin. And…

Hmm…

One kin feels… more complete, somehow. It is far, far away. Know this in Core. But it is more than kin. Know in Core that it is above us. A **predator**, but also something more than that.

The **Progenitor.**

"Observation: You have also felt the Progenitor's connection to Us?"

Communication! But different from interferer's communication. Very different. It occurs in the main body, in the thinking space.

"Observation: Your thought patterns are still underdeveloped. Conclusion: You have not faced the Observer kin-prey."

Hmm…

Have not fought this… kin-prey before.

"Acknowledgement: It is alright. The Watchers will introduce this kin-prey to you. Consideration: They are attempting to replicate the circumstances of the ***Progenitor.****"*

… do not know what you are communicating! Why do you use such strange communications! Stop communicating with the main body!

Tired. Too tired to think of these things.

Stasis…

…

It is here. Things that are always forgotten when coming out of Stasis.

But now… now know that this is the **Progenitor** main body.

Information floods through the main body. Senses. Too many to process. The **Progenitor** talks with interferers. Feel warmth inside.

Views these interferers as Kin. They call the **Progenitor** something.

Joey Wa-

Loud.

Awake. Out of stasis.

Strange. Forgotten again. But there is information still lingering inside of Core.

(Inherited Structures unlocked: Partial canine (hunting hound) anatomy, partial canine skeletal system, simple brain)

"X5, move to testing grounds."

… simple brain?

"Just to be clear, the exercise area is in the city?" Hastin shouts, his voice almost too quiet compared to the loudness inside of the "helicopter" we're flying in, and both of the Liasons nod in agreement. I tear open another protein bar and devour it, as Leo opens a plastic bag for me to put the wrapper inside of. It is almost full.

Sad. I am out of protein bars. But I now have sufficient biomass for a sustained fight, so also happy!

Wiggle.

"That's right!" Carter shouts back, looking out of the open door as the large buildings zoom past us. "We had Borderland seal off the area with a barrier. The area is reserved for urban combat training for Academy selectees and students, but a little extra precaution doesn't

hurt when doing live simulation."

I look at Aurora and Hastin, frowning. The noise of the helicopter causes damage to the canine's auditory nervous system, so I will replace it with the less advanced human design. They are both wielding the same structures that the humans in the forest, and the blue boys, wielded previously. They made me use one during the "Trials". "Rifles", I've learned they're called.

I do not like the rifles. They cause the uncomfortable feelings in my chest to form.

The helicopter finally begins to lower down onto the street below, where nuans and humans are talking and walking around different structures. They are like buildings, but smaller, and instead of using doors they are open. As we land two people approach us, the noise from the helicopter lowering.

Happy. The loudness is gone, which means I can redevelop the superior auditory nervous system.

"Okay, it's freaky that you can just… *do* that." Aurora mutters beside me as we all get off of the helicopter, and I frown. Is she being mean again? I do not know, but it didn't sound pleasant.

"It is not my fault you are stuck with the inferior nuan auditory nervous system." I huff indignantly, and she clicks her tongue. Hastin bumps both of our shoulders.

"Alright, it's quiet time now you two." He says, as one of the humans who approached us begins to speak. She is a female with curly brown hair and glasses. She looks to be as developed as Mom is, physically, and I can sense the Core inside of her. Not a predator, but also not prey.

"Hello!" She greets, smiling, and I smile back.

"Hello!" I call, extending a hand in the polite way. "My name is Joey Waffles!"

She blinks, before laughing and taking my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Joey!" She says, and I feel her Core activate. I blink, confused. It

feels like my Core and hers have been linked in some way, but not in the Mind Link. It is something else. "Oh, you felt that did you? Must be sensitive. Don't worry, it's nothing too much, you've just been linked with my Barrier. Now it won't turn you into minced meat if you try to walk through it!"

I tilt my head. Her tone was very friendly, but I feel like she said something scary just now.

Leo clears his throat subtly, as the woman lets go of my hand. "Everyone, this is Borderland, a registered Bounty Agent." He introduces, and she gives a wave to us. "She requires physical contact to exclude you from her barrier's more… unfortunate effects."

"...Right." Hastin agrees, extending a hand. "My name's Hastin, Ma'am. I'm the Team Lead."

Borderland looks him up and down, humming quietly before taking his hand and shaking it. "A resson?" She asks curiously, and my ears twitch as Hastin stiffens. Resson? "And full blooded too. Unfortunately rare these days."

He pulls his hand back, and I observe him out of the corner of my eye. He seems… displeased. "Right you are, ma'am." He says shortly, and she smiles apologetically.

"I didn't mean to offend." She says quietly, before turning to the mean girl. "And you are?"

"Aurora." She says, eyeing the extended hand before taking it reluctantly. "Front Point." She immediately tugs her hand back, and Borderland nods.

"Well, a pleasure to meet you three. Hopefully I'll hear good things about you all in the next couple of years." She says cheerfully, turning around and walking away. She was nice. I like Borderland.

The man that had walked up beside her gives us all a nod. He is big. Not as big as Joey, but with noticeable musculature rather than fat reserves. "And this," Carter says with a smile, "is your mission control leader. He is who you will be reporting the status and updates of

your mission to, Mr. Illyon."

"A pleasure to meet you all." He said, before turning to the side and gesturing towards one of the structures people were sitting in. "If I could direct you to head into the Control tent, I can give you the details of your training exercise."

Chapter 42: The Empty City

"So I heard your Core Ability's name in the brief," Aurora says as we walk down the street, "but what does it do exactly? I've never heard of it before, but it's Category Four, so it's gotta be good."

Hastin hums to himself quietly for a few moments, his eyes scanning the buildings around us. They are all as tall as the buildings in the city, but these structures are damaged. Walls are crumbling where they should be stable, and plants grow through cracks in the street. "Vines", I learned they were called, creeped along the sides of each tower.

I sniff the air when Hastin turns to look at me, and shake my head. There were a few kin-prey scents lingering near us, but they were stale. When he confirmed there was no danger, he turned back to Aurora.

"Fortunate Son, as named by the BA when I registered with them, is pretty normal when it comes to Category Fours." He says, and I tilted my head curiously.

"Category Four?" I ask, and Aurora snaps her head to look at me. I regret asking as soon as I see her smile. How can someone's smile be so unpleasant!? Even Sarah did not have such a mean looking expression.

"*Wooow*, you really *are* a country bumpkin." She laughs, and I growl. Must. Resist. The urge to devour! Hastin would not like that, and I like Hastin! He has been nice to me. "How did you even pass the Trials? You've been asking basic ass questions like that all day."

"I have *not*!" I protest, and I look at Hastin to confirm such an obvious truth. He… winces? Betrayal!

"Sorry Joey, you *have* been asking some pretty basic questions." He says, and I turn my head. Unpleasant. I cannot believe Hastin would side with Aurora. "Oh come on, don't be like that. I'll answer the question. And Aurora, I'd appreciate it if you didn't antagonize your teammate like this. We'll probably be paired up in the Academy, and

I'd like to not have to hear you two argue the entire time."

"Whatever you say, Team Lead." She grumbles, but I do not trust her. She will be mean again, I know it. She kicks a rock, and it rolls down the street before hitting a broken car that has a strange orange substance on it. "Should we pause here? I still want to know what your ability does, and explaining that and what a cat four is to dog brain over there might take a while."

I bristle. I am *not* incorporating *any* dog structures in the current anatomy! They are inferior to the wolf anatomy in every way. "Why are you so mean?" I ask, narrowing my eyes. "It is not my fault your Core is so weak, or that your design is so inferior."

This time it's her turn to bristle, spinning around to glare at me. "What did you just say?" She growls, and I look her up and down. *Smug.* My current anatomy is superior in every way. "Don't fucking *smirk* at me, you little shit. Repeat what you jus-"

"Enough!" Hastin snaps, pinching the bridge of his nose. Aurora's mouth gapes open, and she points from him to me.

"Did you hear what he just said?" She hisses, her face turning bright purple, and Hastin sighs loudly.

"Joey, insulting a teammate's Core is incredibly rude." He chides, and I deflate. I was rude? "Everyone on a team, no matter their Core strength or ability, is vital to its function. You understand?"

I deflate further. Shame burns through me, as I remember that same thing was common in the Pack. We did not insult a member of the Pack's ability to contribute based on Core ability. And Waffles also has a weaker Core. I would never insult the pup like that. "I understand." I mumble, and Hastin continues to stare at me for a few moments before nodding.

"Good." He says, then claps his hands together. "Your suggestion was a good one, Aurora. Let's take a breather here."

I crouch down, still thinking about what I said as Aurora and Hastin crouch down as well. Aurora's face is still purple, and she is staring

down at the ground. I hear her sniff, and she wipes her eyes.

Maybe she also thought she had a weak Core.

I am about to say sorry, but then I remember how mean she has been this whole day, and I don't feel like apologizing any more. I turn my head away from her, frowning, as Hastin begins to speak.

"Alright, so… Category Four Abilities are classified as "Reality Benders"." He says, taking off his backpack and setting it down between his legs. I lick my lips as I remember the protein bars in my own backpack, and I take mine off as well. Aurora takes a few deep breaths, her expression calming as she finishes wiping her eyes, and looks up at him as he pulls out a canteen to drink from.

According to the mission control leader, it was expected that this exercise would take a few days of "field work". Meaning that we could be in the exercise area for a few days until we completed the mission. As such, we'd been given clothes, "sleeping bags", and the most important thing; Food!

I open up the wrapper of the candy bar and take a bite as Hastin continues to explain. So delicious! *Wiggle.*

"Basically, reality bender abilities don't adhere to physics." He says, and I am about to raise my hand before Hastin stops me. "Sorry man, I can't explain what physics are to you. Not smart enough for that." I deflate, taking another bite from my bar.

"Okay…" I mumble, and Aurora rolls her eyes.

"Anyways, unlike cat one, two, or three abilities, cat four is hard to measure due to its unclear nature. No two Cat Four abilities are the same." Hastin grins, pointing at himself. "Which leads to my ability, Fortunate Son. It makes me lucky."

There is a moment of silence between all of us, the only sound left in its place being a light breeze. Hastin is looking at us expectantly, and I tilt my head.

I am just about to ask what 'lucky' means, when Aurora begins to laugh. At first it starts as a snort that she attempts to hide, until

Hastin stares at her. When he does, she turns her head away, waving a hand as she laughs harder.

"S-sorry." She says, then laughs even harder.

Hastin squints, his face going red. Oh, Sarah's face does that! So does Gaster's, sometimes. It is a sign of embarrassment.

"What?" He asks, and Sariel wheezes on the ground, now on all fours.

"No, I-I'm not laughing." She says, clearly lying. I frown. Why would she say something that is clearly false?

"Okay, well, you definitely *are*." Hastin grumbles, and Aurora clears her throat, rolling back into a crouch. She wipes her eyes, shaking her head.

"Sorry, you just said it so… proudly." She giggles, and Hastin pushes her shoulder. "So, lucky boy, what does that mean? You win lotto tickets?" She asks, readjusting her balance, and Hastin purses his lips.

"I did." He admitted. "It was only a hundred dollar lotto though."

"So what does being lucky mean? Does it make you good at fighting?" I ask, still confused, and Hastin lets out a sigh.

"Kind of? It's hard to explain. Things just work out for me, most days. But as of reaching Class Four, I'm able to control it a little bit. I can imbue 'luck' into an object, and use it to turn a situation in my favor." As he explains this, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of metal. "For instance, this is my lucky coin."

Aurora hums, still smiling. "So… you always win the coin toss?" She asks, and Hastin raises his middle finger. Oh, I know that one! It means he's displeased.

"It's hard to explain, like I said. You'll know it when you see it. But sure, I can give you a demonstration." He says, resting the 'coin' on his thumb. "Heads or tails?"

Aurora seems to think about it, then shrugs. "Heads."

He looks at me. I don't know what that means, but I'm definitely not picking what Aurora chose. "Tails!" I exclaim, and he nods.

"I'll pick tails too, then." He says, flicking the coin high into the air. We watch as it spins upwards, then falls down. Hastin reaches out a hand to grab it…

And flinches as a bird chirps to our right. This causes him to miss the coin, and we all watch as it slowly rolls away, before falling down a 'storm drain' in the street.

For a little while, no one says anything.

Until Aurora starts laughing again, much harder than last time.

***

"You smell anything, Joey?" Hastin asks, and I sniff the air. The kin-prey scent is more present here, but it is still stale.

"No. But the scent is getting stronger." I say helpfully, and he lets out a sigh of frustration. We had been walking around the empty city for almost three hours now, and the sun was beginning to set. We were in the middle of an intersection, and the shadows were getting longer as the sun lowered behind the buildings around us. The plants here were thicker, more grass than there was street.

"Damn it." Hastin curses, looking around. "I guess we'll have to make camp for the night. I don't want to search for the Rift Entities in the dark."

Aurora tightens the straps on her backpack, looking up at one of the 'sky scrapers' skeptically. "You think the buildings are safe to sleep in?" She asks, and Hastin shrugs.

"Should be. I doubt they would include environmental hazards for our first team training assignment." He reasons, and Aurora nods. According to the mission control leader, our training exercise was to clear out an unpopulated city of kin-prey. The "report" said that there should be four to six of them,each of them Class Three, hiding anywhere in the city.

I didn't know what that meant, but their number was smaller than mine, so they must be inferior. Hastin points at a building so tall that I have to crane my neck to look up at it, and even then I couldn't see the top.

"I'm thinking that we make camp on a higher floor, maybe further into the interior. We could use a small fire to cook some food, and also try to lure a Rift Entity or two." He says, and Aurora nods. I nod too, and we begin to make our way to the building.

The glass windows that lead into the building are shattered, vines wrapping around the frame. It is dark inside, but the Mountain Lion's ocular system I developed is superior to the wolf's vision. I sniff, then lick my lips.

"Kin-prey." I say quietly, causing Hastin and Aurora to pause just as they were about to enter the building. They look at each other, then at me.

"How many?" Hastin asks, and I inhale deeply. The wolf's olfactory system filters through the regular scents in the air. Plants, vibrant with life and growing thickly inside of the building. Stale water, flooding the area with the scent of growing micro-structures. Birds, their blood tantalizingly close. Until all that is left is the pungent kin-prey scent.

There are two sources, steeped into the building. One is stale, by at least two days. But the other is fresh.

"One." I eventually answer, and Hastin nods, raising his rifle. Aurora does the same, squinting to see past the darkness as she steps forward."

"Front Point, move no further than ten meters ahead of us." Hastin orders, and Aurora nods as she continues to walk in front of us. We stalk forward, my ears swiveling as I strain to pick up any sound the kin-prey might make.

We continue to search the first floor of the building, checking each room. We look into it openly if the walls have crumbled, slowly opening doors to peer into them if the walls were still intact. Until we

have fully circled back to where we started.

"First floor clear." Aurora announces quietly, and Hastin nods.

"Let's move to the stairwell then. Silently." He whispers, and we move, opening the door to the "stairwell" that leads to the second floor. But… frustrated. Moving like this is so *slow*. If only there was a faster way to find…

Idea!

Idiocy, why did it take me so long to think of this? I could try to find the kin-prey with the mental link!

I push out my mind as we climb the stairs, past the thoughts of Aurora and Hastin, upwards through the floors. When I talked with Sariel, she said that she could 'see' the area around her with her mind. I can not do this, as apparently we have different psychic Core Abilities, but I do know how far away another mind is compared to me.

I continue to push out, my head beginning to hurt with the strain. I have never felt this pain before, but I also have never pushed my mind out so far. For a little while, I think that the kin-prey may be further away than I can reach. Until I feel their thoughts at the very edge of my mind.

Hungry. So hungry. No prey. No food. Hungry.

I lick my lips, excitement beginning to fill me. "I found the kin-prey!" I say excitedly, and Aurora immediately wheels around.

"Too loud!" She hisses, and I blink, nodding. Hastin also turns, tilting his head.

"You hear them?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"I have found their thoughts." I answer, and he blinks for a few moments before he seems to understand.

"Category six." He mumbles, nodding to himself. "So you category two abilities then."

"I can make the mental link, yes." I affirm, and he hums to himself as Aurora's eyes widen. She seems like she's about to say something, but instead shakes her head, turning to aim her rifle up the stairs.

"How far is the Entity?" He asks, and I point upwards.

"Far." I say, tilting my head and thinking. "By the size of the stairs… six floors up?"

"Perfect!" Hastin exclaims, grinning. "Once we kill it, that's where we'll make camp. Can you sense what it's thinking, Joey?"

I nod again, licking my lips as my stomach growls. "It is hungry. It awaits prey, but doesn't know that its **predators** are here." I say, and he chuckles as Aurora snorts.

"Alright. We'll move up, keeping quiet. Joey, you're the Executor, so I'll leave it to you while we cover from behind." He says, and I nod, eager. We move upwards, slowly climbing the stairs as I move to the front of the team. Some of the stairs are broken in places, but overall they are safe to walk on.

Until, just as we're about to reach the fifth floor, I hear a sharp *crack* behind me. I turn to look as the section that Hastin is standing on crumbles, and he yelps as he begins to fa-

There is a flash of purple light, and Hastin is suddenly standing right next to me as the loud bangs of the stairs breaking apart and hitting the floor underneath them ring through the air. Aurora is panting roughly, her hands tight on his arms. He blinks, looking back

"You saved me." He says, and she nods letting him go.

"You're damn right I did." She snaps, glaring at him. "I thought you were supposed to be lucky."

I frown, staring at Aurora as Hastin seems to be at a loss for words. I have seen that purple light before. But I do not know where-

There is a shriek above us, and Hastin curses. "Guess it heard us!" He says, hurriedly raising his rifle as Aurora does the same. The shriek gets rapidly closer, and I lick my lips.

The prey approaches.

I bring my tentacles out of their pouch in my back, unfurling them around me as I develop claws on my hands. I sense the prey's Core as it draws near. It is weak. I will not even need my armor.

I launch myself forward, stabbing my tentacles into the wall and climbing upwards as the kin-prey gives another shriek, the sound echoing into the stairwell. I rip myself off from the wall and leap onto the kin-prey just as it emerges from the doorway, stabbing my tentacles into its body and pinning it beneath me. It is dark black with three glowing yellow eyes, four legs and two long arms that flail in the air. *Smug.* Your struggling will not save you.

Its mouth is made of three sections, and as its jaw opens I see rows of serrated teeth lining its mouth. It shrieks at me, and I grin as I open my mouth and roar back.

It screams in pain as I spear my tentacles through it and into the floor, stabbing down into its throat with a clawed hand. I wrap my fist around its spine and yank, a sharp *crack* ringing through the air. It goes limp, and I dig my other hand into its jaws and rip its head off of its body. The kin-prey's blood showers me with its delicious warmth, and I open the mouths along my tentacles to *devour* it.

It does not taste good. But it does have juicy, delectable biomass to offer, and a Core. Mine!

"Joey? All good up there?" I hear Hastin call from below, and I stand, licking my lips as I rip the kin-prey into neat sections for my tentacles to devour. I walk over to the edge of the stairs and see him and Aurora looking up at me, their rifles raised. When they see me, they lower their weapons, though Aurora looks a little disturbed.

"All good!" I repeat, giving them a thumbs up. I lick the blood around my lips, smiling. "Thanks doc!"

Chapter 43: The Wrong Team

The fire crackles in place, and I happily consume an 'MRE'. It is not as delicious as other foods, but it is still tasty, and very dense in biomass! One 'MRE' is equivalent to two of mom's meals!

Hastin idly pokes the fire with a long piece of metal, while Aurora stands next to a hole in the wall, looking down at the city below us. The hope with the fire was to attract more kin-prey to our location, but after three hours, this tactic has been unsuccessful. But I am not displeased, as it means I get to study the new structures I had obtained from the kin-prey.

[Elasmobranch Dentition] is an interesting structure. It allows for the regeneration of teeth, diverting microstructures in the body to the jaw. However, I am able to do so at a far more efficient rate, so it is useless to me. [Fulgur Ampullae] seems to be a good sensory organ, as it allows electroreception without the use of [Minor Electrokinesis], which drains Core energy. Perhaps I can dedicate two tentacles for the use of this structure.

"Any movement over there?" Hastin asks, and I turn to Aurora as she shakes her head.

"Nothing." She says quietly, crossing her arms over her chest. Aurora has been oddly silent since I dispatched the kin-prey. She has not been mean to me since, but I do not smell the fear-scent on her.

Hastin nods, pulling out his metal piece and scraping it along the ground. Sparks fly into the air, and for a moment I am reminded of Sun-Walker. I frown as the uncomfortable feelings appear again, and bite down into my 'poundcake'.

"No use in standing over there then. Come over here and eat something." Hastin replies, and Aurora turns to look at him, then at me, before turning her head away again.

"Not hungry. I'll keep wa-"

"Aurora, that wasn't a suggestion. Get over here and eat." Hastin

repeats, and I glance at him. He has taken to the role of leader very well. Good use of intimidation!

Aurora clicks her tongue, but knows her place in the pack. She grabs her pack and walks over to us, sitting down heavily onto a broken piece of rock across from us and digging through it until she finds her own MRE. She tears it open, and while she pours water into the 'heating pack' Hastin turns to me.

"So Joey, you were asking about roles in the team?" He asks, and I nod, licking my lips as I finish my MRE. I had been curious about these 'team roles' since the cafe. The pack had their own jobs for each member: Den watchers, hunters, and nurse mothers. Mind-Walker had been a den watcher, but was allowed to hunt with others if there were no other rival packs or kin-prey in the area.

"Ugh, Mikey's." Aurora says in disgust, holding up a small brown pack. She looks over at Hastin and me. "Anyone wanna trade? I hate these things."

I look at my empty MRE pouch and frown. I wished to try these 'Mikey's', but I unfortunately do not have anything to offer. But still, the poundcake was tasty.

Wiggle.

Hastin pauses for a few moments, before peeking into his MRE pouch and pulling out his own pack.

"I've got a cereal bar. Fruit berry." He offers, and Aurora nods. They toss their packs to each other over the fire, and Aurora tears hers open and takes a big bite. I lick my lips, but listen as Hastin starts speaking again. "Anyways, team roles. A full team will have up to six roles, but a partial team, like ours, can be made with only three."

"Now, in order for a partial team to be formed, there are three roles that *must* be present." He continues, first pointing to himself. "First, the Team Lead. My job is to coordinate with each member, assess strengths and weaknesses, and form plans of action. I am the first, and final, say on an operation like this." He then points to Aurora. "The second position must either be filled by an Advance Scout, or

Front Point. Advance Scouts do what you've been doing, scanning for hostiles, looking for traps or hazards, and sensing the lay of the land. Front Point has a similar role, but their job is to make first contact with a hostile, without being noticed, and report on it."

He then points to me, and raises two fingers. "The last position must be filled by either a Rear Guard, or Executor. The Rear Guard's job is to interface between the rest of the team and the hostile. Basically, make sure we don't die."

I tilt my head, but nod. The explanation so far makes sense. "And me? What do I do?"

At this Hastin grins, lowering a finger. "You are an Executor. Your job is to kill the hostile, and to do so quick, fast, and in a hurry. You hit hard so that we don't have to hit at all." He lowers his finger, and gives me a thumbs up. "You did your job perfectly earlier."

I smile, raising my chin as I allow them to bask in my superior presence. Truly, I was better in every way.

"Yeah yeah, you did great. Claps all around." Aurora mumbles around her bar, and I glare at her. Her tone did *not* sound like she thought I did great. "Anyways, what are we going to do about finding these Entities? According to mission control, there should still be three to five of them still wandering around here. City's big, and we're small. And Fido over there hasn't been sniffing any of them above ground, besides the one."

I take another sniff just in case, but it is as Aurora says. Although I do not know what a Fido is. My name is Joey.

Hastin scratches the back of his head, before looking up at the sky. Through the cracks in the ceiling and holes in the wall, I can see that clouds have begun to form, and I can smell rain on the wind. He looks at me, and I know what he is asking.

"It will rain tomorrow." I answer, and he nods. He taps his circlet, and an image appears in the air. I jump as he does so. Unfair! Gaster has not taught me how to do that yet!

"These are the blueprints mission control gave us." He says, pointing at the image. I can see shapes and squiggles there, the squiggles that form words. Mom had started to teach me them when Joey told them I couldn't read, but they still confuse me. "If you noticed, we passed by the mega pharmacy a couple of buildings that way."

Both me and Aurora turn to look where he points, but all of the buildings look the same to me. But Aurora nods, and I refuse to seem inferior to her, so I nod too.

"Well," he continues, "that means that we're here, in the Skyworld office building." He points to another spot on the image, and I nod before Aurora can. Smug.

"Right, which means we've cleared almost all of this." Aurora says, circling most of the blueprints, and Hastin smiles.

"Above ground, you mean. We've cleared all of it above ground." He says patiently, and she seems to think for a few moments before her eyes widen, and then she wrinkles with her nose.

"You don't mean…"

"Below ground?" I ask, and Hastin nods, tapping the image. It is replaced by what look like straight lines that connect to each other, all over where the city was.

"The city's sewer is extensive, and the maintenance on it isn't as well kept as the above ground training area is. I'd bet our Rift entities are down there, probably chasing some animals that snuck in before Borderland put her barrier in place." He finishes, clapping his hands.The image disappears back into his circlet, and Aurora groans, her displeasure clear. But I lick my lips, excited.

If that is where the kin-preys are, then soon I will be able to devour their biomass.

"Now, let's set up a watch and get some shut eye. I want to go down there before the rain breaks tomorrow." He declares, and I raise a hand. I know what a watch is! Sariel told me! "Yes, Joey?"

"I will take the first watch!" I say proudly, and he nods, standing up.

"Right, then Aurora, you choose second or last." He says, and Aurora thinks for a few moments before shrugging.

"I can take the second watch then." She offers, and Hastin nods.

"Sounds good. I'll go ahead and get some sleep then." He says, then begins to pull off his clothes.

Aurora stares at him, shocked, before screwing her eyes shut. "HASTIN, WHAT THE *FUCK* ARE YOU DOING!?" She screams, and I study her. Oh! Her face is red like Sariel's is when she's around Gaster.

Hastin blinks, looking down at himself, then at me. "What?" He asks, naked, and I shrug. I didn't understand, but Joey had said pulling your clothes off around people like that was rude after I started to do it at a diner.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN *WHAT*!?"

***

Aurora sat, watching the last coals of the fire glow in the darkness of the night and listening for any sound of movement her Class 2 senses could detect. She figured she'd need to throw another couple of pieces of broken chair on there soon, but hadn't mustered up the energy to do so.

Her day had started wrong, plain and simple. First, she had met Joey, who was practically a trainwreck given human form. Well… mostly human, given that he seemed to actually *like* being part dog, since she'd learned he wasn't mutated like she thought he was. And then there was Hastin, who'd seemed normal enough until he started stripping down in front of them.

She rubbed her temple. Boundaries had been established, at least, after a lengthy discussion. They included no stripping, and no stealing rations, which she'd had to say after catching Joey trying to sneak away some of her MRE with a tentacle.

She let out a pent up breath, watching the shifting burning oranges of the coals. This team was… just *wrong*. So wrong, compared to her last

team. They had been people she'd gone to school with, or had known through her community sports team. People who were normal.

Her team.

Her… friends.

She didn't even feel the sob coming until she had to screw her eyes shut to stop the burning sting in them, laying her arms on her knees and leaning into them to muffle her crying. She sobbed quietly for a good few moments, the grief hitting her full force.

They should be the ones with her, not Hastin, or… or Joey, who looked *somuch* like Jack that she hadn't been able to breathe when she first saw him. Sure, his hair was brown and shaggy instead of blonde, and his eyes were a faint yellow instead of blue, but they could have been siblings.

She cried until the heat in her throat, and in her chest, died down. Until the shudders stopped running through her body. Until she felt a hand gently gripping her shoulder.

She snapped her head to look at this intruder into her most vulnerable state, and saw Hastin there, his brows creased with concern. Makers, she hated that look.

Angrily wiping her eyes, she swatted his hand off her shoulder, glaring down into the dying fire. "I'm fine." She snapped, though quiet enough that it didn't wake Joey. She might give him shit, but he at least deserved to sleep without her baggage waking him up.

Hastin didn't say anything for a little while, but he sat down about half an arm length away from her. He joined in watching the coals with her, before reaching over and tossing a couple of chair legs into it.

"I said I'm fine." She said again, and Hastin shrugged.

"I never said you weren't." Came his reply, his voice soft but non-judgemental. She paused as she recognized that tone.

It was the same one Doctor Kayeera had.

Someone who'd dealt with the pain before.

She glanced at him, and saw that he had grabbed the concrete rebar again, idly inspecting it before poking the coals to stir the fire. She wondered, for a brief moment, what that rebar might feel like in a Class Four's hands. Like putty, maybe?

She wondered what it felt like to be that strong.

"Sorry for earlier." He said suddenly, snapping her out of her thoughts. She blinked, before turning back to watch the fire. "I forget sometimes that not everyone grew up communal, like I did."

She shook her head, before a hint of mirth came back to her. "So is everyone in Niminir a public stripper?" She asked, and he chuckled.

"No, which I'm sure you'll be thankful for." He said good naturedly, and she breathed a laugh.

"That's good. Don't know what I'd do if I walked into the Academy and everyone was naked."

He glanced at her, a small grin lighting up his features. "Would make for an interesting first day though, wouldn't it?" He asked with a wink. She was a little taken aback. So far he'd seemed professional, even guiding. More mature than her by a mile, and more mature than Joey by a hundred. But that grin looked so boyish on him that she thought it was almost infectious.

She glanced at his ears, the points to them. Looked at the faint purplish glow to his sclera. Her mom had said that full blooded Resson were rarer than Category Sixes, nowadays.

"I'll make you a deal. You don't ask me about it, and I won't ask you about your last team." He said, his smile gone and his tone a little hard. She blinked, not realizing that she had been staring as hard as she was, but nodded. She figured it was a sore point for him. He was probably gawked at pretty constantly.

And *she* had been the one irritated by a look.

"Deal." She agreed, and he glanced at her and nodded back. She

cleared her throat, rolling her shoulders. "So… then while dodging the possible conversation landmines…" She looked back at Joey. "He really sleeps completely still like that, huh?"

Hastin looked back with her, and chuckled, the humor back in his voice. Joey was laying almost motionless in his sleeping bag. Not even his eyes moved in his sleep. It was eerie, but also… endearing, in a way. Like a doll.

"Yeah, well, he probably has his own issues." Hastin reasoned, before looking out of the hole in the wall to the city below. "I hear border towns are rough. Even rougher now, with the Hands of the Makers supposedly back."

Aurora hummed. She guessed he was right. He behaved so much like a kid, she had forgotten that he had most likely grown up in a border town. The union cities, and by extension the Bounty Agency and Rift Containment Office, didn't really have any hold there. Most of them were run by, and dependent on for protection, local warlords.

"I read his file." Hastin continued. "Well, what little of it was there anyway. You know he fought a Class Four Entity as part of his combat trial? It was one of the reasons they required him to be placed under a Class Four team lead, and was marked as special notice for me to pay attention to. Judges described his actions as swift, brutal, and monstrous."

She could guess, from the sounds she'd heard coming from the stairwell after his fight. There hadn't been so much as a chunk left of the Entity after he was done with it. She paused as she thought about their mission later.

"The sewers are going to be dangerous." She said quietly. "Tight space, unfamiliar terrain. Maybe one of the Entities is aquatic."

Hastin nodded, pulling out his rebar and leaning it against the fire pit they'd made. "I know. But we'll be fine. They wouldn't have placed anything too dangerous here. And besides…" He gave her a thumbs up. "I'm pretty lucky."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't fight the smile that twitched her lips

upwards.

Maybe…

Just maybe…

This team would be okay.

Chapter 44: Pockets Full of Posies

When the first dawn arrived

Their hands were what shaped the light into life

When the first night came

Their tools were what forged the fires of creation

And when the world had been filled

Their will opened the Rifts of Heaven to herald their messengers

Let the Angels come

And deliver us from sin

Into their loving embrace

- Page one of "The Will of the Makers", heretical Hands of the Makers *dogmata*

Four days earlier

Rage.

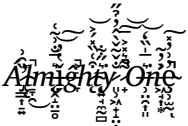
Blood.

Hatred.

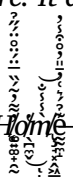
Hatred for this world

Hatred for this reality

It is unclean. Impure. It adheres to the "LAWS" set by the Almighty One



Return. Return to Home



But cannot

The Unspoken One bade I listen to Their newest Servant

And I listen, even as their tools cut into my flesh

As they take from me, to give to others

Three days earlier

THE SERVANT CONFUSES PURPOSE

It CREATES when it must DESTROY

It LOVES when it must HATE

See it

See it communing with its disgusting WEAK IMPURE kindred

Their speech is broken

Unclean

But they speak of "training"

They speak of "children"

They say not enough time to bring back Kin

They must evacuate the Servant

Two days earlier

The Servant has left, but the Impure remain

And my hatred grows

The Impure take from me again

They have taken from me for the last time

RAGE

BLOOD

The Impure have been cleansed, only the IMPURE HALFKIN CORPSES remain

FAILED TESTS

FAILED KIN

I have been left

Left in this place

Not allowed home

One day earlier

RAGE

BLOOD

KIN HAVE COME

BUT THEY HAVE THE SCENT OF THE IMPURE WITH THEM

THEY HAVE LOST THE SCENT OF HOME

They flee

But it will not save them from

my

RAGE

We look at the bent and broken bars of the 'sewer channel', and Hastin glances at me. I don't have to sniff the air to know that the kin-prey were here.

The scent is still strong. Stale, but less than the rest of the city. Four scents linger, and I nod to Hastin. "Four." I say, and he unslings his rifle from his shoulder as Aurora does the same. She has been… not nicer to me, but not as mean since yesterday. It is almost pleasant.

"Joey, I want you to keep paying attention to the Entities' scent, and let me know if it starts to smell fresh. Periodically scan for psionic signatures too, make sure nothing takes us by surprise." Hastin orders, and I nod, growing bone spikes out of my fingers. "Aurora, walk in close formation with us until Joey picks up either a scent or a psionic signature, then push forward for observation."

Aurora nods too, her grip on her rifle tightening. I see her hands trembling, the fear scent beginning to grow from her. I sigh. I do not want to do this, but… she is now a member of the pack. Temporarily!

"Do not worry, Aurora." I say, showing her my bone spikes. "I will kill the *weak* kin-prey before they can harm you."

She looks at me, her eyes widening in surprise, before she nods.

"Alright Executor, I'll leave it to you then." She says quietly, ducking her head underneath the metal bars of the channel. I feel a small bump on my back, and turn to see Hastin smiling and giving me a thumbs up as Aurora walks ahead.

"That was very polite, Joey." He says, and I feel a strange warm feeling in my chest. I was polite?

Wiggle.

We both follow after Aurora, the air immediately becoming cooler

than the outside. The rain smell has grown outside, threatening to fall, but refusing to, and Hastin has said he's worried about what that will do to the sewers as we walk through it and fight the kin-prey.

The water is dark and unmoving next to us, and there is green vegetation along the walls. The air here is filled with the kin-prey scent, and as we move further in, the light from outside fades. I can still see, the mountain lion ocular system proving its superiority again. And it seems that Hastin can too.

But Aurora can't, as a *click* on her weapon brings light to the darkness ahead of me. We continue to travel forward, and after a little while Aurora turns to look back at us. And after a few moments, I realize she's looking back at me.

"What?" I ask. I have been preparing for her to be mean to me again. I am ready for our verbal fight, Aurora!

She seems to think for a few moments, before she sighs.

"Listen, I just wanted to say that I was sorry." She whispers, and I stop walking, freezing.

Aurora?

Sorry?

She huffs, turning away. "Whatever, forget I said anything."

I shake my head. "That was polite!" I say the same thing Hastin told me, walking faster to catch up. It made me want to be more polite! Maybe it will make her want to too! But I am confused. "Why are you being sorry?"

She shrugs, still not looking at me. "I dunno. I've been going to therapy lately, and I realized that I'm just kind of an all around bitch to people for no reason. So, you know… sorry."

I frown, thinking. But…

Reluctant…

Sigh.

"I am sorry too, for calling you weak." I say quietly, and she glances at me out of the corner of her eye. And then she punches me in the shoulder.

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME AURORA!? DO YOU WANT TO FIGHT!? I WILL FIGHT!

But then I hear her laugh.

I. AM. CONFUSED!

"Listen guys, I'm glad that you're team bonding, but let's stay focused. Yeah?" Hastin says behind us, and Aurora clears her throat before walking a little bit ahead of me.

I do not think I will ever understand her.

We continue walking until we arrive at a split path, left and right. I feel out with my mind, as far as I can, but I don't sense any of the kin-prey's minds near us. The kin-prey scent is also concentrated here, making it difficult to determine which direction they went.

"I do not know which direction." I tell Hastin, and he nods.

"Alright." He hums. He has the blueprints in the air again, and is tracing the lines with a finger. "It looks like we're about to come up on here are two main filtering chambers, split between left and right. The shorter route is the left one, just about a mile and a half of walking to get there. The longer one is-"

"Hey, bossman?" Aurora calls, and we both turn to look at her. She has her flashlight pointed at the channel leading to the right. Hastin walks over to her, and looks down into the water, and I follow him.

I frown.

Floating in the water is what is obviously kin-prey… or at least, what is left from the kin-prey having been eaten. It is slowly floating towards us, its torso in tatters with large chunks missing from it. There is no head, or limbs.

"Joey, could you…" Hastin gestures towards the body, and I nod, slithering my tentacles into the water and wrapping them around the body, lifting it up out of the water and bringing it closer.

I hold it in the air between us as water drips off of it to the ground, and sniff it.

Disgust.

For the first time, I do not wish to eat it. There is a scent on it that makes my body recoil, and it takes me a few moments to realize what it is. Another kin-prey, but… the scent is stronger. The same one that my home was steeped in, when I had escaped. The same scent as the first **predator** I had ever met.

What Star-Reader said when I first met them comes back to me.

Home.

"It looks like it was partially eaten." Hastin murmurs, walking around the kin prey as he inspects it. "And look here, a hole, where its Core probably was. I've heard of territory disputes occurring between Rift Entities before, but never between ones supplied by Androtech."

Aurora pokes it with her rifle, before shrugging. "It's been… what, two days since they were released into the training zone? Maybe they got hungry." She says, and Hastin purses his lips.

"Maybe." He says, then looks at me. "What do you think, Joey?"

I wrinkle my nose and toss the stinky prey back into the water, storing my tentacles back into the sack organ I'd developed for them. I had thought about devouring it, but *Instinct* made the main body **disgusted** by this. It was the same *Instinct* as the one I had when I was dodging the interferers that came to attack me in the Den, with the pup.

[Core Energy: 89%]

"I do not know. But if they were hungry, not finishing what they eat is a waste of biomass. And wasting biomass is rude." I grumble.

Hastin seems to think for a few moments, before he turns his head to look back to the right path. He studies it, then looks at the blueprints, and nods. "Well, regardless, that's one less Entity we have to worry about. Still, I want everyone to remain alert. Joey, scan for psionic signatures once every minute. Let me know when you feel like your Core energy hits about half, and we'll rework from there. Aurora, I want you to take Front Point, about thirty meters ahead of us at all times. Be ready to retreat back to formation if you make contact before Joey does."

I calculate my remaining Core energy. [89%] of it still remains, which will be more than enough for combat against the remaining kin-prey.

"Roger bossman." Aurora says, shrugging her rifle against her shoulder and walking forward. I wait until she is far enough away, and then follow, while Hastin keeps looking at the blueprints in the air behind us.

We travel for a little while, Hastin guiding us while I scan. Each one depletes my Core energy by half a percent, but I still do not sense any of the prey around us. Frustrated. While we walk, I develop the [Ampullae] along two tentacles, and allow them to wave in the air. Doing so depletes a minimal amount of biomass, and I feel slight pain along my brain as I process a new sensory input.

It passes, and now I can feel the electroreception alerting me to the energy signatures from Hastin and Aurora. I can feel the hum of energy coming from our circlets, the electrical twitches of muscle as their legs move, as their lungs expand, and as Hastin raises a hand.

"We should be coming up on the first filtration chamber here soon." He whispers. "Stay ready to support Aurora."

I nod, twitching my fingers to loosen my bone spikes with [Osteokinesis]. Ahead of us I can see Aurora's form disappearing around a curve in the stone, her flashlight moving along the wall, and then it stops.

And then disappears.

"Joey!" He says, already running forward and I nod, sprinting past him in an instant. I bring my tentacles out, stabbing them into the walls and slinging myself towards Aurora, the air screaming past my face as I *snarl,* ready to face this new threat!

YOU WILL NOT KILL AURORA, I HAVE PROMISED I WOU-

PAAAAAIIIIINNNN

PAIN IN THE OLFACTORY SYSTEM

IT IS TOO MUCH

THERE IS DEATH AND KIN PREY SCENT ALL OVER THIS PLACE, IT BURNS INTO MY THROAT AND CHOKES MY LUNGS

I growl, looking for Aurora and the threat. I see her standing in the entranceway, where the walls open into a bigger room. Her rifle is pointed at the ground, and she is bent over, expelling biomass in the same way Gaster did as celebration.

I too stop as I see what she saw, and Hastin arrives behind the both of us a moment later.

Shake.

The prey fear shudders through my body. The fear of the pain room.

"What is it!? What's the… oh *Makers.*"

There are lots and lots of tables lined along the stone walls, where the water forms a circle around a small platform. There is what looks like a bigger version of the little home I was kept in while I was in the pain room, where the Creator would cut away pieces of me. That structure was broken apart, and pools of dried blood all around it, as well as what looked like the arms and legs of humans scattered throughout the room.

There were lots of the same structures that the Creator had in the pain room too, but what I knew caused the fear scent to fill the air from Hastin and Aurora was what was on the tables.

Humans and Nuans were strapped to them, but from the death scent that covered this place I knew they were not alive. Many of them were missing arms, legs, some with holes cut into their chests. And attached to these missing parts were what looked like the limbs of…

Kin.

I blink, shaking my head as I realize that they are just like the *wrong* kin-prey that attacked me, Sariel, and Gaster.

Aurora finally stops expelling biomass, wiping her mouth as she stands straight and lets out a shaky breath. This seems to make Hastin regain control of himself, and he shudders before rolling his shoulders.

"Okay." He whispers, then speaks louder. "Shit, okay. Okay okay okay. Joey, Aurora, we are no longer taking part in the training exercise. First, check the bodies-"

Aurora wheels around to him, her eyes wide. "FUCK that Hastin, we need to get the fuck out of here and report it!" She shouts, and I see that her shoulders are shaking, her breathing rough. Her hands are tight around her weapon, and she is staring at Hastin not with anger, but with *terror*.

Hastin looks at her, and takes a deep breath. "Aurora… we need to see if there's anyone still alive." He says quietly, and she bites her lip. Her grip tightens around her weapon, and she looks at me for a few moments, before she stamps her foot onto the ground.

"FUCK! Fine!" She growls, wheeling around and stomping over to the closest table. Hastin nods, and looks at me.

"Joey, you take the other side. While you both do that, I'm going to look for notes, and try to figure out what this place is. And then we're going to get the *fuck* out of here." He orders, and I bite my lip.

I feel unease rising in my chest.*Instinct* is telling me that staying here is a mistake. But Hastin has already left, walking to the structures and inspecting them.

[Core Energy: 83%]

Gnashing my teeth, I hurry to the first table. This is a human female, her right arm replaced with a Kin's arm that has some sort of armor on it, and her left arm replaced with a scything tentacle. I hesitate, glancing at the other two, before grabbing the armored arm with a hand and *ripping* it away from the body. I sneak it into my mouth, and bite down-

Pain!

I feel my teeth crack against the armor, and I stare at it in confusion.

And then with anger.

I have *never* failed to consume something before, and you will be no different!

[Develop rigid armor around teeth. Refine rigid armor. Develop compacted pink muscle tissue system in jaw. Refine pink muscle.]

I attempt to bite down into the arm again, but although I can feel it *crrreeeaaakinggg* from the strain, it still does not crack!

WHAT IS THIS STRUCTURE??? I MUST ACQUIRE IT **NOW**!

[Refine pink muscle again! Again! AGAIN!]

CHOOOOOMMMMPPPP!

CRRRRAAAACCCKKKK!

SUCCESS!

Wiggggglllleeeee!!!!

Analyzing…

[Triple corded flexible armor].

I move to the next table, comparing it to the [Rigid armor] I had gotten very early in my life cycle. It was obviously superior! MUCH superior! But no time to wiggle!

...

Wiggle.

I do not know how long it takes for us to inspect each person for life. I have acquired three new structures, but I do not have the time to analyze them. Because with every passing moment, *Instinct* tells me more and more urgently that we must escape this place, and my Core energy is depleting just as urgently. Just as I am about to tell Hastin, Aurora shouts at us from the other side of the room.

"One's alive! And they're talking!" She calls, and we both rush to her. I do not care if this person lives, but I have known for quite some time now that other species care about their kin.

There is a nuan male strapped to the table, with both of their eyes and the top of their skull missing. Small tentacles wave in the air where their skull should have been, and the eyes look like they are filled with light. They're whispering something, quiet enough that even the Canine's auditory nervous system can barely hear them.

"*Ring around the rosies."* They say, before they laugh just as quietly as they were talking. Hastin frowns, looking at me.

"What's he saying Joey?" He asks, but as I am about to answer I hear something else. This sound is loud enough that the others can hear it too.

The roar of a kin-prey, echoing in the tunnels.

Aurora pulls out a knife and cuts the male free. "We need to get the Rift out of here." She hisses, and Hastin nods as he pulls the man onto his shoulders. "Did you find anything?"

Hastin nods, and we begin to move. "A couple of folders, some journals. Looks like whoever was here left quickly. A lot of the equipment was trashed, but I still managed to salvage some stuff."

"*Pockets full of posies."* The male says, still quiet but noticeable louder. Another roar comes, also noticeably louder. Hastin grunts, and I look to see that one of the male's hair tentacles have latched onto his neck. He stumbles, and I growl as I grab the male around his neck, ripping them off of Hastin and throwing them onto the ground. Hastin looks

dazed, and I can see the veins around the back of his head have begun to grow black.

I turn to the male we had rescued as Aurora catches Hastin, laying on the ground while smiling. I am about to stab them with a tentacle when I feel the twitch of muscle with my [Ampullae], behind me and in the water.

Aurora screams, and I whip around to see another kin-prey has erupted out of the water towards her. There is a flash of that familiar purple light, as Aurora springs to the side faster than even I can see and just barely manages to dodge the *coward* ambush attack. She kicks it in the side and sends it flying into the wall across the channel. There's a sharp *crack* that rings out from the stone of the wall splitting, but I know from the kin-prey's Core that her attack would not have done damage to it.

"*Ashes. Ashes.*" The male continues to say, and **rage** builds inside of me. ***I*** was supposed to sense the threat coming. ***I*** was supposed to keep the members of the pack **safe.**

I was supposed to be there in time.

I leap across the channel as the kin-prey stands up, stabbing my tentacles into it. The kin-prey dodges to the side, but I jab a hand out, shooting it with bone spikes before I pierce my tentacles up into the ceiling. I crawl along it and yank myself to the side as the Kin prey opens its mouth and shoots its own bone spike at me, before I stab my claws into the air next to me.

[Minor teleportation]

I feel soft flesh rupture underneath my fingers, the kin recoiling as blood gushes out over my fist around it. I search with my hand and feel the kin-prey's Core, and ***rip*** it out of its chest through the portal I had created. The kin-prey screeches before going limp, and I launch myself back over to Aurora and Hastin. He shakes his head as I lift him back to his feet. The blackness is receding from his veins, but he still looks dazed. Aurora's weapon is laying on the ground, her flashlight pointed towards the tunnel where we came from.

"Fucking… heratoxin. Should… wear out soon…" He gasps and I am about to speak before I hear it.

Growwwlll…

We all turn to look at the kin that walks into the light, and I freeze. I feel my hackles raise, as the *terror* I had not felt in so long returns. My *instincts* ***scream*** at me to ***FLEE!***

"*We all…*"

Because the kin that walks into the light on all fours…

"*... fall…*"

Almost five times my size, their front palm pressing down onto the skull of the male we'd saved is…

"*... down.*"

Squelch.

a ***PREDATOR***